

*Theoria, Praxis,*  
and the Contemplative Life  
after Plato and Aristotle

# Philosophia Antiqua

A Series of Studies on Ancient Philosophy

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*Theoria, Praxis*  
and the Contemplative Life  
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*Edited by*

Thomas Bénatouïl  
Mauro Bonazzi



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2012

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Theoria, praxis, and the contemplative life after Plato and Aristotle / edited by Thomas Benatouil, Mauro Bonazzi.

p. cm. – (Philosophia antiqua, ISSN 0079-1687 ; v. 131)

Proceedings of a conference held in May 2009 in Gargnano, Italy.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and indexes.

ISBN 978-90-04-22532-9 (hardback : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-90-04-23004-0 (e-book)

1. Plato–Congresses. 2. Contemplation–Congresses. 3. Platonists–Congresses. 4. Philosophy, Ancient–Congresses. I. Bénatouil, Thomas. II. Bonazzi, Mauro, 1973-

B398.C64T44 2012

180–dc23

2012007341

This publication has been typeset in the multilingual “Brill” typeface. With over 5,100 characters covering Latin, IPA, Greek, and Cyrillic, this typeface is especially suitable for use in the humanities. For more information, please see [www.brill.nl/brill-typeface](http://www.brill.nl/brill-typeface).

ISSN 0079-1687

ISBN 978 90 04 22532 9 (hardback)

ISBN 978 90 04 23004 0 (e-book)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

This volume is dedicated to Fernanda Decleva Caizzi

"What are these books of yours, Alison?" Jedwell amiably intervened. "Something to read? (...) Nothing much to do in this hole except read."

"Alison's writing a history, sir," Sezley answered, his temper past.

"But history," Jedwell said, "is being made ... A history, may I ask, of what?"

Lewis might have let the question slide; it had been asked for the sake of asking. But he could not resist watching Jedwell's face and saying:

"A history of the contemplative life."

"The what?"

"The contemplative life—particularly in England since the Renaissance."

"But who lives it?"

"You know India and I don't, sir, but isn't it true that in India—"

"In India, yes. I know. But you said England. Who lives it there? Who and how and why and with what effect?"

"That's a goodish summary of my book," Lewis said. (...)

"Are you really writing that book—seriously? Then let me tell you this. You can't write a book about the contemplative life unless you're the sort of man capable of living it."

"I know," Lewis said. "It's much more important to me to become a man of that sort than to write the history. But you must have a concrete task to live by while you're learning—worshipping God, or shepherding, or illuminating manuscripts, or writing a history. It's all one."

Charles Morgan, *Fountain* (1932)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume collects the papers presented in a conference ('The *Theoretikos Bios* in Hellenistic, Imperial and Late Ancient Philosophy', Gargnano, May 2009) organized by the joint effort of the Universities of Milan (Mauro Bonazzi, Fernanda Decleva Caizzi, and Franco Trabattoni), Leuven (C. Steel and Gerd Van Riel), Paris-Sorbonne (Carlos Lévy), Lorraine (Nancy 2) and the *Institut Universitaire de France* (Thomas Bénatouïl). This conference was the fifth instalment of *Diatribai*, a biennial meeting devoted to the study of Hellenistic, Imperial, and Late Ancient philosophy. Previous publications include:

- M. Bonazzi–V. Celluprica (eds.), *L'eredità platonica. Studi sul platonismo da Arcesilao a Proclo*, Bibliopolis, Napoli 2005;
- M. Bonazzi–C. Lévy–C. Steel (eds.), *A Platonic Pythagoras. Platonism and Pythagoreanism in the Imperial Age*, Brepols, Turnhout 2007;
- M. Bonazzi–C. Helmig (eds.), *Platonic Stoicism-Stoic Platonism. The Dialogue between Platonism and Stoicism in Antiquity*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2007;
- T. Bénatouïl–E. Maffi–F. Trabattoni (eds.), *Plato, Aristotle, or Both? Dialogues between Platonism and Aristotelianism in Antiquity*, Olms, Hildesheim-Zürich-New York 2011.

The list of participants in the 2009 conference included Thomas Bénatouïl, Mauro Bonazzi, Frederick Brenk, Francesca Calabi, Giovanni Catapano, Fernanda Decleva Caizzi, Pieter D'Hoine, Michael Erler, Giovanna Giardina, Angelo Giavatto, Valéry Laurand, Carlos Lévy, Alessandro Linguiti, Emanuele Maffi, Tessa Marzotto, Min-Jun Huh, Jan Opsomer, Arnis Ritups, Geert Roskam, Lucia Saudelli, David Sedley, Carlos Steel, Franco Trabattoni, Georgia Tsouni, Gerd Van Riel, Simone Vezzoli, Tim Whitmarsh. We wish to thank all the participants to this conference for the friendly yet lively discussions of the papers. We also thank Danilo Mongelli for his invaluable help in preparing the present volume for the press.

More than anyone else, Fernanda Decleva Caizzi devoted constant and precious efforts to the success of the Gargnano Conferences and to the study of ancient images of the philosophical life. It is a great pleasure and an honour for the *Diatribai* organizing committee to dedicate this volume to her.



ΘΕΩΡΙΑ AND ΒΙΟΣ ΘΕΩΡΗΤΙΚΟΣ  
FROM THE PRESOCRATICS TO THE END OF ANTIQUITY:  
AN OVERVIEW

T. Bénatouïl and M. Bonazzi

I

The notion of θεωρία and the advocacy of the contemplative life have often been considered as central and specific to Greek philosophy, and have thus received quite a great deal of attention. For a very long time, it has been however heavily biased in favor of Plato and Aristotle. Many philosophers have taken their views about contemplation as more or less representative of the views of Greek philosophy as a whole, or even of ‘the Greeks’ or ‘the Ancients’ about theory and practice, as if no other philosophical position had been voiced on this topic in Antiquity.<sup>1</sup> As for historians of Ancient philosophy, during the last fifty years, they have focused on Plato and, above all, Aristotle to the point that it seems that θεωρία and the contemplative life have no history outside the *Republic* and the last chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>2</sup>

Although this focus might be a by-product of academic fashion, it testifies also to a belief in the lack of significant theoretical ambitions in Ancient philosophy after Plato and Aristotle. Hans Blumenberg aptly spelled out this belief in his *Hauptwerk, Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*.<sup>3</sup> According to his analysis, the theoretical curiosity defining philosophy for the Presocratics, Plato and Aristotle was drastically limited by Hellenistic philosophers through a combination of metaphysical dogmas about the *cosmos* and scepticism about knowledge of nature. Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics offered an essentially therapeutic philosophy directed chiefly against theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Pieper (1952), despite his apt mention of Antisthenes; Arendt (1958) ch. 1, who distinguishes only between the Greeks and the Romans; Heidegger (1977) or Rorty (1979) 11, 38–39.

<sup>2</sup> In the huge bibliography on θεωρία and the theoretical life in Plato and Aristotle, see for example Festugière (1936); Adkins (1978); Gigon (1987); Cooper (1987); Gastaldi (2003); Lisi (2004); Richardson Lear (2004) and Nightingale (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Blumenberg (1985) 243–325.

investigation, which was held to be useless and even damaging for man in his search for happiness. As for Platonists (Cicero, Philo, Apuleius or Plotinus), Blumenberg approaches them mainly, if not only, as preparing the Christian censure of *curiositas*. This view of Hellenistic and Imperial philosophy seems quite wrong to us, and, although it cannot be discussed in detail here, it is a chief overall purpose of this volume to show that θεωρία and the theoretical life survived after Aristotle and were the objects of thorough debates, powerful arguments and original applications from Theophrastus to the end of Antiquity.

Ours is obviously not the first study on the post-classical history of θεωρία, but the previous attempts have been either vast overviews, which could not do justice to the complexity of the various post-classical philosophers' positions,<sup>4</sup> or were undermined by too loose a definition of their topic. For example, Alberto Grilli's *Il problema della vita contemplativa nel mondo greco-romano*, which covers the Hellenistic and early Imperial age, is in fact concerned with the peaceful life away from politics and gives pride of place to εὐθυμία, more than to θεωρία proper.<sup>5</sup> Other studies about the Stoics simply assimilate their claim that ethics is dependent upon physics to an advocacy of contemplation.<sup>6</sup> As Michael Erler shows in his paper about Epicurus in this volume, more attention should be paid to specific uses of the notion of θεωρία by each author, to the practical consequences of the various ways of life and to critical engagements with Plato or Aristotle. Shifting the attention from Plato and Aristotle to their successors does not entail ignoring Plato and Aristotle but, on the contrary, taking stock of their profound influence.

This volume is in fact less concerned with the post-classical debate about ways of life as such than with the appropriation, criticism and transformation of Plato's and Aristotle's positions about θεωρία and the contemplative life from Theophrastus onwards. This is only natural in a volume arising from a conference, the fifth of the *Diatribai di Gargnano*, which was part of a series devoted to the history of Platonism from the early Hellenistic age to Late Antiquity. But there are also strong historical and philosophical reasons to this focus.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Festugière (1949); Boll (1950); Snell (1951); Redlow (1966); Vogl (2002). Joly (1956) is also useful, but devotes only 60 pages (out of 194) to post-aristotelian authors.

<sup>5</sup> See the critical remarks by Festugière (1971) 249 and Boyancé (1959).

<sup>6</sup> Forschner (2002). As noted by Festugière (1949) 75–76, arguing about or from the order of the *cosmos* and contemplating it are two different things. Although both are present and connected in Stoicism, they should be distinguished.

It is very likely that Plato, followed by Aristotle, invented the concept of the life devoted to θεωρία and distinctive of the philosopher, so much so that later philosophers had to acknowledge this new conception of philosophy and take side for or against it. It is true that Plato, Aristotle and some of their disciples like Heraclides of Pontus or Theophrastus refer this notion to previous authors such as Thales, Pythagoras or Anaxagoras.<sup>7</sup> But, as Werner Jaeger showed in a famous paper on this topic,<sup>8</sup> we should not infer from these texts that these Presocratics already led a contemplative life. The biographical anecdotes testifying to it are more probably projections of the *Lebensideal* of the Academy on these *sophoi*. Jaeger's thesis has been criticized<sup>9</sup> and should indeed be qualified: the advocacy of θεωρία or at least of knowledge of nature as one of most valuable human activities probably dates back to Ionian philosophy.<sup>10</sup> There is thus no need to suppose that the Academy forged the biographical anecdotes exemplifying its *Lebensideal*: they were rather selected at the expense of others anecdotes, which testified to the political involvement of Thales or Pythagoras and which were in turn (as noted by Jaeger) emphasized by critics of the contemplative life such as Dicaearchus.<sup>11</sup>

Before Plato, praises of knowledge over and above all other activities can also be found in some of Euripides' plays,<sup>12</sup> in Anaxagoras, who is often thought to have influenced Euripides on this matter, and perhaps in Democritus. Putting this tendency in the context of the various images of the specialists of the sacred competing at the end of the fifth century, Laura Gemelli Marciano (2006) has shown that this contemplative image of the philosopher probably has its roots in attempts by certain intellectuals to

<sup>7</sup> See for example Plat. *Theaet.* 174a (Thales); Aristot. *Eth. Nic.* 1.1141b3, 1179a13 (Anaxagoras); Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* 5 (Heraclides Ponticus about Pythagoras); Diog. Laert. 1.25 (Heraclides Ponticus about Thales).

<sup>8</sup> Jaeger (1948/1928). See also Burkert (1960) and Carter (1986) 131–154. Jaeger's interpretation is restated in Nightingale (2004) 17–26.

<sup>9</sup> See Festugière (1936) 18–44; Joly (1956); Gottschalk (1980); Riedweg (2004); Gemelli Marciano (2006).

<sup>10</sup> This is already acknowledged by Jaeger (1947/1933) 150–185. See also Decleva-Caizzi (1985).

<sup>11</sup> About this disciple of Aristotle, see Bénatouil's paper in this volume, 18–19.

<sup>12</sup> See in particular Euripides, fr. 910 Kannicht: ὀλβιος ὅστις τῆς ἱστορίας / ἔσχε μάθησιν, / μήτε πολιτῶν ἐπὶ πημοσύνην / μήτ' εἰς ἀδίκους πράξεις ὁρμῶν, / ἀλλ' ἀθανάτου καθορῶν φύσεως / κόσμον ἀγήρων, πῆι τε συνέστη / χῶθεν χῶπως. / τοῖς δὲ τοιοῦτοις οὐδέποτ' αἰσχροῶν / ἔργων μελέδμημα προσίζει. Note that, while anticipating several aspects of the theoretical life, Euripides does not use the verb θεωρεῖν here. About Euripides' *Ion* and *Antiope*, see Carter (1986) 155–173 and Demont (1990) 165–174.

shield themselves from accusations of impiety raised against magicians and other specialists of the sacred under suspicion.

Nevertheless, ‘the tendency to exalt the contemplative life to the exclusion of practical activity’<sup>13</sup> goes a step further in this direction and seems quite specific to the Academy. Moreover, if one wants to understand the originality and impact of the Academy, one should not reduce its position to the championing of a retired life devoted to liberal studies. There is much more to the contemplative life, which must be considered as a concept deeply embedded in Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophies. At least four elements are crucial to this notion. First, an ethical justification of the superiority of knowledge over other human activities, and the ensuing advocacy of a life chiefly (but not necessarily exclusively) devoted to it. Second, a psychological and epistemological elucidation of contemplation, assigning it to a separable and immortal, faculty, *νοῦς*, and distinguishing it from other lower cognitive activities such as sensation, opinion, experience, practical reason, etc. Third, an ontological and cosmological definition of the entities contemplated as superior divine beings, which are both objects of knowledge and models to be imitated. Fourth, an implicit or explicit analogy between the intellectual activity defined by the first three aspects and the witnessing of a religious and cultural spectacle (*θεωρία*) or festival, which justifies the name *θεωρία* given to the philosopher’s activity.<sup>14</sup>

These four dimensions of contemplation are famously elaborated in many of Plato’s dialogues, especially the *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Philebus*, and in Aristotle’s *Protreptic*, *Metaphysics* Λ.7–9, *De Anima* 3.4–5 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 6 and 10. Although Plato’s and Aristotle’s handling of these four points are clearly not identical,<sup>15</sup> they distinguish both of them unmistakably from previous philosophers. If testimonies from Aristotle and later authors can be trusted, Anaxagoras might already have defined *θεωρία*, or at least knowledge of nature, and the life devoted to it by their focus on the heavens, but he does not seem to have taken the celestial bodies to be divine, and probably neglected the psychological and

<sup>13</sup> Gottschalk (1980), 30. See also Carter (1986) 178–179; Demont (1990) 299–328 and Gemelli Marciano (2006) 205.

<sup>14</sup> About the philosophical transposition of the religious and cultural practice of *θεωρία* by Aristotle and, above all, Plato, see for example Festugière (1936); Rausch (1982) and Nightingale (2004).

<sup>15</sup> See below about Imperial Platonists such as Philo and Plutarch, who emphasized Plato’s articulation of contemplation and ethical or political practice.

epistemological specificity of this knowledge.<sup>16</sup> The combination of the four aspects of contemplation is therefore not found before Plato and Aristotle.

Be that as it may, this strict fourfold definition is not meant to exclude any author from the history of the contemplative life or to focus our attention again on Plato and Aristotle, but merely to emphasize that *θεωρία* and *βίος θεωρητικός* are not philosophically neutral or strictly ethical concepts. This definition is offered here as an analytical tool useful to investigate the post-classical history of contemplation and to draw precise comparisons between various positions and Plato's or Aristotle's, as all the papers in this volume attempt to do.

## II

The Hellenistic period is the golden age of the Athenian philosophical schools. In this context, it might seem natural for philosophers to embrace the contemplative life or some version of it, thus promoting their own devotion to philosophical teaching and research in order to gain more followers. This is clearly not what happened. After the first generation of disciples of Plato,<sup>17</sup> we have no trace of an explicit defence of contemplation in the Academy. As to the new philosophical schools, the Cynics or the Pyrrhonists,<sup>18</sup> the Epicureans or the Stoics,<sup>19</sup> they clearly did not subscribe to Plato's and Aristotle's *Lebensideal* and even attacked several aspects of it.

The paradox is however only apparent here. First, as far as philosophical arguments are concerned, it is wrong to assume that intellectuals are bound to recommend their own life as the best or fall into a contradiction between their words and deeds: philosophers ranking political activities

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<sup>16</sup> Although Anaxagoras posited an eternal intellect (νοῦς) and gave it a crucial cosmological role, testimonies do not suggest that this entity had any counterpart in human souls and knowledge: see Laks (2002).

<sup>17</sup> Besides the *Epinomis*, usually attributed to Philip of Opus, and Heraclides Ponticus' descriptions of past philosophers as contemplative, positive allusions to contemplation can be found in testimonies about Xenocrates: see Joly (1956) 130–131.

<sup>18</sup> The Cynics are probably the most radical opponents of the contemplative life, since they do away not only with knowledge of heavens as useless but also with intellectual knowledge and imitation of god as a whole: see Diog. Laert. 6.27 about Diogenes mocking astronomy. Although Timon opposes Pyrrho to philosophers investigating nature, he still compares Pyrrho's peaceful life and wisdom to the Sun and holds them to be godlike (see Diog. Laert. 9.64–65 and Sextus *Adv. Math.* 11.20= fr. 60–62 Caizzi).

<sup>19</sup> See Decleva Caizzi (1993) and below.

over academic pursuits could lead a scholastic life,<sup>20</sup> and others who had occasional political activities nevertheless favored a version of the contemplative life.<sup>21</sup> Plutarch blames the first Stoics for advocating political involvement while spending their life in a school away from their city, but this is part of a polemical attack aimed at defending the Platonic conception of the philosophical life against the Stoic criticism of it.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the Stoics and the Epicureans usually cast their practical ideals in terms of what the sage would do, and thus do not imply that they should or can themselves put these ideals into practice. Moreover, their recommendations are explicitly or implicitly very sensitive to circumstances, both for philosophical and social reasons,<sup>23</sup> and thus easily qualified or suspended without contradiction.<sup>24</sup> This is especially true in the case of ways of life, which are rarely exclusive: they are defined by a dominant activity, which does not preclude and sometimes implies the temporary practice of others.

Second, Plato and Aristotle championed the contemplative life in order to define a new kind of pursuit, to distinguish themselves and their disciples from other intellectuals—chiefly the sophists and the orators—and to explain or legitimize the foundation of their schools.<sup>25</sup> Once the philosophical schools were securely established in Athens, there was no need anymore to advocate the value of intellectual studies and the retreat from the public sphere associated with them. In fact, the recognition of the philosophical schools as institutions of higher education and of their leaders as members of the social elite probably lead the philosophers to mitigate the anticivic dimensions Plato had attached to the philosophical life.

These considerations suggest that the lack of any explicit advocacy of the contemplative life in our testimonies about the Hellenistic Academia and Lyceum should not be taken as implying a rejection or neglect of Plato's and

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<sup>20</sup> Good examples are the Peripatetic Dicaearchus, or Zeno and Chrysippus.

<sup>21</sup> Xenocrates for example took part in an Athenian embassy to Antipater (Diog. Laert. 4.9).

<sup>22</sup> See Bonazzi (2007) and his paper in this volume, 141–146.

<sup>23</sup> By 'social reasons', it is meant that we should not forget that only a very limited number of people were able to choose their way of life (or profession) in ancient societies, even in the affluent classes, where the daughters had no choice whatsoever and the sons were supposed to conform to family traditions, social norms and what perpetuating the wealth of the family required. This is evidenced by the frequent references, among philosophers, to family resisting their son's desire to become a philosopher: see for example Diog. Laert. 6.75–76 or Muson. *Dissert.* 16.

<sup>24</sup> See Roskam (2007) 35 about Epicureanism and Inwood (1999) for Stoicism.

<sup>25</sup> About the Academy and the Lyceum as institutions aimed at fostering the contemplative life and the possible echoes of their activities in Plato's and Aristotle's texts, see Natali (1991) and Vegetti (2003).



Aristotle's hierarchy between intellectual and practical activities in these schools. Most Academics had the reputation of keeping their distance from public affairs.<sup>26</sup> It is thus probably the revision of Plato's epistemological and metaphysical—rather than ethical—doctrines that lead the Academy away from contemplative life in the strictest sense. Note however that, as Carlos Lévy remarks in this volume, Cicero emphasizes that doubts about the possibility of reaching the truth do not preclude the search for it to be a worthy and fulfilling activity for human nature (*Lucullus* 127). Although this position might date back only to Philo of Larissa, it suggests that the New Academy did not throw away the contemplative baby with the dogmatic and metaphysical bath water.<sup>27</sup> A different evolution can be reconstructed from the rare testimonies about the Hellenistic Lyceum. As shown in Thomas Bénatouïl's paper, although Theophrastus maintained the substance and structure of Aristotle's doctrine, he emphasized several practical limits or obstacles to the contemplative life and was thus led to raise doubts about Aristotle's notion of intellectual activity, which probably paved the way to more serious evolutions, from Strato onwards, and ultimately to the advocacy of the 'mixed life' in the Hellenistic Lyceum.

These changes in the Academia and the Lyceum can be seen as reactions, concessive or not, to the criticism of Plato and Aristotle which are central to the Epicurean and Stoic positions. This is particularly clear in the case of Epicurus, as Michael Erler suggests. Indeed Epicurus' reference to θεωρία in his *Letter to Menoeceus* (128) has to be properly regarded as an Epicurean interpretation of the *Timaeus*, in which the adoption of some Platonic notions enables Epicurus to better explain the value of his philosophy. For Epicurus insists, on the footsteps of Plato, upon the importance of contemplating the world as a necessary basis for all philosophical investigation, thereby rejecting the charge of reducing human life to a quest for bestial pleasure. But, in opposition to Plato, Epicurus further argues that his philosophy leads human beings to a sure knowledge of the world and thus makes possible a truly happy life. Appropriation is thus used as a polemical device for claiming the superiority of one's own school.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> See esp. Philodemus' *Historia Academicorum* (PHerc. 1021 and 164), col. XIV about Polemo.

<sup>27</sup> See further Bénatouïl (2007) about evidence pointing to an Academic defense of the scholastic life directed against Stoicism.

<sup>28</sup> On the similarities and important differences between the contemplative life and the Epicurean life, and between θεωρία and φυσιολογία, see Erler's paper in this volume, 48–55, and Festugière (1946) 50–54, 127–130, Boyancé (1959), Bénatouïl (2003), Roskam (2007) and Brown (2008).

As for the Stoics, they are a difficult case. Probably targeting the Academy and the Lyceum, Zeno held knowledge of the liberal arts to be useless (Diog. Laert. 7.32) and Chrysippus blamed as covert hedonists the philosophers advocating a 'scholastic life'.<sup>29</sup> Yet, the Stoics gave a new definition of and an important role to θεωρία in the philosophical life. These have recently been the object of several studies and are thus not dealt with in detail in this volume.<sup>30</sup> Still, the main aspects of the Stoic position, especially the ethical import of contemplation, are discussed in Margaret Graver's paper about Seneca and Emidio Spinelli's about Sextus Empiricus. Using our previous strict definition of contemplation as a yardstick, we can summarise the position of the Stoics as follows.

Their most obvious disagreement with Plato and Aristotle is on the psychological and epistemological dimensions of contemplation, since they do not posit an intellectual faculty sharply separated from lower cognitive faculties. Hence Cleanthes' surprising claim that poetry is the best way to reach 'the truthful contemplation of the gods'.<sup>31</sup> Of the cosmological or theological dimension, the Stoics retain—probably influenced by the *Timaeus* itself—<sup>32</sup> the idea that the sage imitates God through his knowledge of the workings of the cosmos, but these are hardly similar to Platonic or Aristotelian unmoved Forms and Gods, since the Stoic Zeus is constantly and actively engaged in the whole world and its transformations. Contemplation is therefore not the paradigmatic divine activity it was for Aristotle, and its scope and functions are broadened: the heavens are still a central object of contemplation, but the diversity, beauty and efficiency of nature around us receives a lot of attention too, as eloquently shown in Aratus' *Phaenomena*,<sup>33</sup> Cicero's *De natura deorum*, book 2 or Seneca's *Quaestiones naturales*.

As to the ethical dimension of the contemplative life, the Stoic position grants an equal value to action and knowledge as two inseparable aspects of reason.<sup>34</sup> Together with the previous assumptions, this has two consequences. First, virtue or wisdom has a strong theoretical component, which is not reduced to the contemplation of the cosmos, nor even to physics, but

<sup>29</sup> Plut. *De Stoic. rep.* 1033C.

<sup>30</sup> Forschner (2002), Bénatouïl (2007), Brown (2008), Inwood (2009), Bénatouïl (2009) and (forthcoming).

<sup>31</sup> Philod. *De musica* col. 28.1 Kemke = *SVF* 1.486. See Festugière (1949) 310–333.

<sup>32</sup> See Reydam-Schils (1999) and Betegh (2003).

<sup>33</sup> See Festugière (1949) 333–339.

<sup>34</sup> A similar tenet is crucial for Epicureanism as well, as emphasized by Erler in this volume, 52–54.

also includes dialectic and ethical principles. Second, since virtue is sufficient for happiness, the happy life is automatically *always* based on theory (and includes practice), no matter what activity it is chiefly devoted to. The sage does not need to spend his days studying or contemplating Nature to fulfill the theoretical dimension of his nature. The choice between ways of life becomes a matter of preference based on circumstances and human nature, the social dimension of which is crucial and leads the sage to favor the political over the 'scientific' life, when the former is available to him, but also allows him to opt for a retired life in other circumstances, as shown by Margaret Graver's close analysis of the arguments of Seneca's *De otio*.

### III

As is now well known, the passage from Hellenistic to Early Imperial philosophy is not marked by a radical break. Rather it is easy to remark that in many cases philosophers continued to discuss and debate the same problems. This explains the central position that the Stoics kept holding on our topic in the following centuries.<sup>35</sup> First, Imperial Stoics had much to say on contemplation, to the point that they have often been thought to lean towards Platonism.<sup>36</sup> Allusions to or appropriation of Platonic ideas however hardly imply rejection of traditional Stoic positions, as shown by Margaret Graver about Seneca. The case of Sextus Empiricus is also a good sign that, despite the changing philosophical scene with new protagonists entering it, the Stoics are still important players. As shown in Emidio Spinelli's paper, Sextus offers a systematic criticism of θεωρία in the Stoic sense, that is to say not only of contemplation but also of any theory which claims to ground our conduct and to provide a scientific 'art of living'. This radical and unique attack does not however lead Sextus to give up the whole idea of a way of life guided by some knowledge of the world around us: the Pyrrhonist is allowed to make his everyday decisions on the basis of an empirical 'observance' of life and even of *technai*, provided these are restricted to the relevant phenomena.

However, in spite of the persisting influence of Hellenistic problems and solutions under the Empire, the philosophical agenda was increasingly dominated by the return to Plato and Aristotle, to the effect that a new and

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<sup>35</sup> Remarkably, traces of Stoic doctrines continuously pop up in later philosophers, as most of the papers collected in this volume argue.

<sup>36</sup> See Bénatouïl (forthcoming).

explicit emphasis on contemplation and the contemplative life was now laid upon.<sup>37</sup> Yet, below the surface of an apparent concord, the problems were many and the views strikingly differed. In particular, the problem of conciling Plato's and Aristotle's theories progressively came to dominate the scene.<sup>38</sup> For if it is true that both Plato and Aristotle celebrated the value of θεωρία, such celebrations were far from identical. Two different accounts can be spotted as the most interesting. On one side we can enlist Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch of Chaeronea, whose positions are investigated respectively by Valéry Laurand and Mauro Bonazzi. In spite of many differences, both Philo and Plutarch agreed in not paying too much attention to the problem of conciling Plato's and Aristotle's view, and the result is that both argued for a tight connection between θεωρία and πράξις. For the (divine) objects we strive to contemplate, once they are properly grasped, necessarily foster a deep transformation of oneself (i.e. of one's own soul) which inevitably bears practical (ethical but also political) consequences. Philo's and Plutarch's analyses of this issue enable them to promote a daring celebration of the philosopher as the real guide of the human community, at a time when the possibility of a real involvement in politics for philosophers was more and more difficult.

The strict articulation between θεωρία and inner transformation is distinctive of Imperial Platonism as a whole, and this appears to distinguish it from the Aristotelian position. Yet, in the long history of Platonism, the confrontation with Aristotle was regarded as more and more crucial, and the practical-political consequences of contemplation were progressively neglected. A telling example is Alcinous, as David Sedley shows in his paper. Unlike Philo and Plutarch, Alcinous turns out to be heavily influenced by Aristotle, to the extent that he tries to detect into the dialogues, and most notably in the *Republic*, a theory corresponding to what we read in the celebrated chapters of the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The result is that a tension between θεωρία and πράξις emerges with the greatest emphasis laid on the former. The major divergence with Philo and Plutarch is then not so much the different evaluation of the active life (which Alcinous too somehow commends) as the possibility that *theoria*

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<sup>37</sup> The first step of this evolution can perhaps be witnessed in Antiochus of Ascalon, who recovered many of Plato's and Aristotle's positions about contemplation to answer the Stoics' and the Epicureans' ethical attacks, as Cicero's *De finibus* book 5 shows: see Bénatouïl (2009) and Tsouni (2012).

<sup>38</sup> For a general assessment, cf. now Karamanolis (2006).

and *praxis* focus on different objects. Here as elsewhere, Alcinous' combination of Aristotelian problems and Platonic texts remarkably anticipates the Neoplatonist agenda, as can be seen in Alessandro Linguiti's and Gerd Van Riel's papers. Indeed, as already noted by Pier Luigi Donini, Plotinus' position can be described 'as the triumph of the ideal of θεωρία as it emerges in the tenth book of the *Nichomachean Ethics*'.<sup>39</sup> The same conclusion also applies to other Neoplatonists, down to Damascius. Sure, the emphasis on *theoria* still involves an inner transformation (i.e. of the soul), but less interest is now paid to the practical-political consequences.<sup>40</sup> A further clue about the Aristotelian influence is the strict connection between contemplation and pleasure, which is investigated by Gerd Van Riel in Damascius' *Commentary on the Philebus*.

Needless to say, however, such agreement on the superiority of a life devoted to detached contemplation, which betrays an Aristotelian influence, led to new and intriguing problems. For, unlike Aristotle and the Peripatetic tradition, Platonists had to cope with the fact that the proper objects of contemplation, the transcendent forms and principles, were not completely graspable by human beings. As Michael Erler suggests, this was already part of the Epicurean anti-Platonic polemics. Indeed, whereas Hellenistic and Imperial philosophers, like Antiochus of Ascalon, Seneca or Ptolemy<sup>41</sup> directed contemplation at celestial bodies and at 'the secrets of nature',<sup>42</sup> Imperial Platonists from Philo to Plotinus to Damascius tried on the contrary more and more to refocus θεωρία on purely intelligible objects and beyond, with nature and heavens as only the first steps of a ladder inspired from the ascent of the *Symposium*.<sup>43</sup> But this shift from physics to metaphysics was dramatically complicated by the acknowledgment that a proper contemplation of the divine and transcendent principles was not available to human beings. A solution was provided by Plotinus' famous claim that a part of our soul is always contemplating the forms, even when

<sup>39</sup> Donini (1982) 272 quoted and supplemented by Linguiti in his paper, 185 below.

<sup>40</sup> See Linguiti, 186–190 below and O'Meara (2003).

<sup>41</sup> See *Almagest*. 1.1, H4–7, where Ptolemy defines theoretical philosophy in an aristotelian manner, divides it into physics, mathematics and theology, but emphasizes that mathematics is the only theoretical science which yields 'sure and incontrovertible knowledge', so much so that mathematics (including astronomy) rank above physics and theology and can contribute to them. About Ptolemy's quite unique position on these matters, which draws on Aristotle and Platonism, see Feke and Jones (2010) 202–205 and Feke (2012).

<sup>42</sup> See *De fin.* 5.58 or *Ac. Post.* 1.19 with Hadot (2004) 48–50, 105–106, 178–183.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Laurand's remarks, this volume, 129–135, and Festugière (1971) 245–246.

we are not aware of it.<sup>44</sup> But Plotinus' theory of the 'undescended soul' was rejected by later Platonists, who offered other ways to account for the possibility of human contemplation. Indeed, this is one of the major problems in the history of Platonism, upon which the study of the genres of lives debate casts a new light.

#### IV

Along with theoretical problems, one must not neglect the historical, social, and political contexts, which prove often crucial to the assessment of the very sensitive issue of the best way of life. Particularly telling are the already mentioned Cicero, Philo, Seneca, and Plutarch. Cicero's changing position about the best life is influenced not only by his philosophical preferences but also by the Roman *mos maiorum* and his own political career, as Carlos Lévy argues in his paper. In his *De vita contemplativa* studied by Valéry Laurand, Philo describes and praises as 'contemplative' the marginal way of life of a sect which has few things in common with his own life in Alexandria. As for Seneca, he seeks to advocate his or his friends' contemplative retreat in ways both compatible with Stoic principles and acceptable to the Emperor, as shown by Margaret Graver. And Plutarch too, according to Mauro Bonazzi, reminds us of the crucial importance of the Emperors' attitudes towards philosophers, hostile or requiring their service, in their assessment of political activities and choices of life.

This political context is crucial for Late Antiquity as well. With the christianization of the imperial court and the whole empire, pagan philosophers progressively lost any opportunity to assume the role of counsellors they were regularly offered in previous periods,<sup>45</sup> and were forced to retire into the schools, since teaching was nearly the only social activity they could legally and safely undertake, especially after Hypatia's murder in Alexandria in 415.<sup>46</sup> This is probably one important non-philosophical reason why late Neoplatonist philosophers seem much more contemplative than previous platonists like Plutarch and than Plato himself. The problem of choosing between a life of study and a life devoted to one's community did not however disappear in Late Ancient philosophy. Christian intellectuals were

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Chiaradonna (2005) and (2009a) 81–115.

<sup>45</sup> See Brown (1992) ch. 2.

<sup>46</sup> See Chuvin (1990) 95–121.

dramatically faced with it when they were elected as bishops, an office which involved numerous political, social and administrative activities and was thus perceived as hindering intellectual ones.

A good but almost tragic example is Synesius of Cyrene, a pupil of Hypatia who was elected bishop of Ptolemais in 411 and often writes in his letters about his reluctance to assume this function, because it will prevent him from devoting himself to 'the beauties of the intellect, which one can enjoy only in blessed leisure, without which "life is unlivable" for me and my kindred spirits' (*Ep.* 11.14–17, cf. 41.94–115). When his fears become real, he complains to other bishops that their office is a sacred one which should be aimed at contemplation (*Ep.* 41.290). Although he concedes that some kings-priests in the past and some bishops with a stronger character than his have combined contemplation and political activities, he insists, using both Neoplatonic and Christian doctrines, that they are incompatible for men in general, and chiefly for himself, and suggests to his peers that a man of action should replace him as bishop (*Ep.* 41.290–355). While his situation was far less dramatic (Synesius died in 413), Augustine faced a similar challenge, which informed his thinking on the contemplative and active lives: it probably led him to qualify his early strictly Neoplatonic position about the hierarchy between contemplation and action with a defence of the active life too, as Giovanni Catapano shows by focusing on the polemics against the Manicheans. It is a remarkable fact, and a further confirmation of the enduring importance of the topic of the present volume that the defence of some biblical figures, notably Leah and Rachel, leads a Christian priest to tackle a problem which was distinctive of the debates between pagan philosophers.

Similar remarks apply also to Maximus Confessor, a theologian whose philosophical merits still await to be adequately acknowledged, as Carlos Steel argues in the last paper of the present volume. Indeed, in Maximus, we find a last and extremely fascinating appropriation of the philosophical defence of the contemplative life, which is adapted to the context of the monastic life. In one of his treatises (*Ambigua ad Johannem* VI 10), while interpreting some ambiguous sentences by Gregory of Nazianze, Maximus offers a clearly Platonic celebration of *theoria* which also includes practical life as a necessary condition for the proper contemplation of God. And just like Platonists had to face the problem that a proper contemplation of the forms was not possible, so theologians such as Maximus (needless to say, similar remarks apply to the case of Philo of Alexandria and Augustine) tackle the same problem with regard to God's superiority and transcendence, by elaborating a series of modes which enable us, as far as this is

possible, to contemplate. This monk who lived between the sixth and the seventh century thus provides a further confirmation of the importance of this problem for the determination of what intellectual activity, be it philosophy or theology, consists in. To reconstruct this history in detail is the aim of the present volume; that other studies will follow is our hope.



PART ONE

THE HELLENISTIC AND POST-HELLENISTIC DEBATE



THÉOPHRASTE : LES LIMITES  
ÉTHIQUES, PSYCHOLOGIQUES ET COSMOLOGIQUES  
DE LA CONTEMPLATION\*

Thomas Bénatouïl

*Ars longa, vita brevis*

I. La «vie selon l'intellect» dans le Lycée

Il est bien connu qu'Aristote n'étudie pas l'activité intellectuelle dans un seul traité, mais que la nature, la valeur et la portée de celle-ci sont analysées dans plusieurs textes adoptant un point de vue différent : la fin de l'*Ethique à Nicomaque* (10.7–9), les chapitres sur la «pensée de la pensée» de la *Métaphysique* (Λ.7 & 9), les chapitres sur l'intellect du *De anima* (3.4–8), voire le chapitre final des *Seconds Analytiques* (2.19) à propos de la connaissance des principes par l'intellect. Bien que l'articulation entre ces textes soit parfois difficile à saisir, ils semblent bien complémentaires et dessinent une conception systématique de l'activité contemplative<sup>1</sup>. Qu'est devenue cette doctrine après Aristote ? L'évolution de chacune de ses parties (théologique, éthique, psychologique et épistémologique) a été étudiée : on a examiné si les thèses des textes qui viennent d'être mentionnés ont été maintenues ou non par les péripatéticiens<sup>2</sup>, mais on a rarement cherché à comparer leurs évolutions. Tel est l'un des objets de cet article. Je voudrais mettre à l'épreuve l'hypothèse selon laquelle les inflexions ou les modifications importantes qu'ont connues les différentes thèses aristotéliennes sur la vie κατὰ τὸν νοῦν ont été similaires et donc interdépendantes, si bien

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\* Je remercie les participants aux *Diatribai di Gargnano*, en particulier David Sedley, Georgia Tsouni, Franco Trabattoni et Mauro Bonazzi pour leurs remarques sur la première version de ce texte. Merci à Myrna Gabbe pour une utile discussion sur l'intellect.

<sup>1</sup> Sur ce point, voir l'introduction de ce volume, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Voir en particulier Movia (1968) sur la psychologie, Sharples (2002) sur la théologie et Joly (1956) 133–139 et White (2003) sur l'éthique.

que l'articulation qu'en a proposée Aristote serait demeurée structurante chez ses premiers disciples, en dépit de leurs désaccords (entre eux et avec lui) à propos de la contemplation.

Cicéron, dans l'une de ses lettres à Atticus, évoque « une si grande controverse entre Dicéarque, dont tu es proche, et mon ami Théophraste, que ton [ami] met le πρακτικὸν βίον loin devant tous les autres, alors que celui-ci [préfère] le θεωρητικόν »<sup>3</sup>. La plupart des interprètes en ont déduit l'existence d'une véritable dispute à l'intérieur du Lycée entre Dicéarque de Messine et Théophraste<sup>4</sup>. Pamela Huby (2001, 317) souligne néanmoins à bon droit que le terme *controversia* n'implique pas nécessairement une polémique directe, bien que *tanta* aille plutôt dans ce sens, et pourrait simplement désigner une divergence d'opinions: ce serait Cicéron qui met en scène le débat à partir de sa lecture des deux disciples d'Aristote. Quoi qu'il en soit, est-ce que ce débat éthique sur les genres de vie a eu une contre-partie psychologique ou métaphysique? On peut le supposer, dans la mesure où Dicéarque renonçait à l'intellect séparable et immortel du *De anima*, puisqu'il soutenait que l'âme ne se distingue pas du corps. La conception de l'âme de Dicéarque est difficile à reconstituer du fait de l'ambiguïté de nos maigres témoignages<sup>5</sup>, mais le rejet de l'immortalité de l'âme semble bien aller logiquement de pair avec le rejet de la vie contemplative<sup>6</sup>.

Robert Sharples (2001, 154) s'est néanmoins demandé si les auteurs du quatrième siècle admettaient vraiment une telle « connexion », et a objecté que, « dans l'*Eth. Nic.* 10.7–8, l'argument d'Aristote en faveur de la vie contemplative repose sur l'idée d'un intellect divin (*god-like*) et non sur celle d'immortalité individuelle ». L'association de la vie contemplative à la nécessité de « s'immortaliser dans la mesure du possible » (*Eth. Nic.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ad Att.* 2.16.3= 33M= 25W= 481 FHS&G: « nunc prorsus hoc statui, ut quoniam tanta controversia est Dicaecharcho familiari tuo cum Theophrasto amico meo, ut ille tuus τὸν πρακτικὸν βίον longe omnibus anteponat, hic autem τὸν θεωρητικόν, utrique a me mos gestus esse videatur. puto enim me Dicaecharcho adfatim satis fecisse; respicio nunc ad hanc familiam quae mihi non modo ut requiescam permittit sed reprehendit quia non semper quierim ». Je cite les références des témoignages sur Dicéarque dans l'édition nouvelle de D. Mirhady (2001) abrégée M, puis dans celle de Wehrli (1967) abrégée W.

<sup>4</sup> Voir Jaeger (1948) 450–451, Grilli (2002) 39–41, Joly (1956) 133, Wehrli (1967) ad loc.

<sup>5</sup> Voir en particulier Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* 1.21, 24, 41 & 51= 14–17M/ 7–8W et Sextus *Pyr. Hyp.* 2.31= 18M/8bW avec Movia (1968) 71–93, Gottschalk (1971), Sharples (2001) et Caston (2001).

<sup>6</sup> Voir Wehrli (1967) 50, Fortenbaugh (1984) 202–204 et (2011) 394 ou Schneider (1994). On notera également qu'aucun ouvrage de théologie ou de métaphysique n'est attribué à Dicéarque, qui est présenté par Cicéron comme ιστορικώτατος (*Ad Att.* 6.2.3= 79M/20W).

10.7.1177b33) n'implique certes pas l'immortalité de l'âme, mais Aristote a mentionné auparavant et mentionne juste après la partie intellectuelle de notre âme dont dépend la vie contemplative : l'idée implicite semble donc être que cette partie est immortelle ou, au moins, en contact avec des objets éternels, si bien qu'en nous identifiant à elle, nous nous immortalisons. En outre, lorsque Aristote décrit ce *θεῖον τι ἐν αὐτῷ ὑπάρχει*, en vertu duquel l'homme peut mener la vie contemplative, il précise immédiatement : « dans la mesure où cela diffère du composé, cette activité diffère également de l'autre vertu » (*Eth. Nic.* 10.7.1177b27–29). On a bien là une dépendance directe entre l'intensité voire l'existence de la contemplation et l'autonomie de l'intellect individuel (qu'il soit ou non immortel) par rapport au composé corps/âme. Le Stagirite aurait donc indéniablement admis que la réduction de l'âme au corps par son disciple réduisait l'activité contemplative à « l'autre vertu », à savoir la vertu pratique. Dicéarque raisonnait bien dans le cadre de l'articulation aristotélicienne entre éthique contemplative et psychologie (voire théologie) de l'intellect, mais en retournant les hiérarchies défendues par Aristote dans chacun de ces domaines.

Qu'en est-il de son adversaire Théophraste ? La question du rapport entre les positions d'Aristote et de Théophraste est notoirement complexe, en particulier dans les domaines qui nous intéressent ici, non seulement à cause de la rareté et de la difficulté des textes du disciple, mais aussi à cause de l'ambiguïté des positions du maître lui-même, dont les textes sur l'intellect figurent parmi les plus débattus du Stagirite. Il est donc exclu de fournir, dans ce qui suit, une interprétation de chacun de ces textes puis de leur comparer les textes de Théophraste. Je voudrais plutôt subordonner le problème de savoir si Théophraste suit ou critique les positions d'Aristote à la recherche de parallèles ou d'articulations entre les analyses éthique, psychologique, épistémologique et cosmologique de Théophraste à propos de l'intellect. Je vais tenter de montrer qu'on peut y mettre en évidence une même conscience aiguë des limites de notre activité intellectuelle. Il est possible que cet accent « pathétique »<sup>7</sup> soit un effet de la sélection opérée par les témoignages dans l'œuvre de Théophraste, et que ce dernier ait fait preuve ailleurs de la même assurance ambitieuse qu'Aristote. Il serait toutefois surprenant que le même biais affecte des témoignages aussi différents que ceux de Cicéron en éthique, ceux de Thémistius et Priscien en psychologie et l'opuscule sur les principes connu sous le nom de

<sup>7</sup> J'emprunte le terme à Laks-Most (1993) xxvi. Voir ci-dessous p. 34, n. 71.

*Métaphysique*. L'existence de parallèles ou liens précis, qui dessinent une orientation originale et systématique, entre ces différents traitements de l'activité intellectuelle me semble témoigner plutôt en faveur d'une inflexion ou d'une correction à la marge par Théophraste de la doctrine d'Aristote, maintenue néanmoins dans ses positions fondamentales.

## II. La supériorité de la vie contemplative

Selon plusieurs témoignages cicéroniens, Théophraste aurait accordé ses faveurs à la vie contemplative. Selon le *De finibus*, Aristote et Théophraste ont «souvent admirablement loué la science de la nature» et «approuvé au plus haut point une vie tranquille consacrée à la contemplation et à la connaissance de la nature»<sup>8</sup>. Ces témoignages posent deux problèmes. D'une part, dans le cinquième livre du *De finibus*, Pison présente la doctrine et la tradition de l'Ancienne Académie telle qu'Antiochus d'Ascalon la reconstituait : peut-on se fier à cette description ? Aristote et Théophraste sont cependant *distingués* pour leur option contemplative à l'intérieur de cette tradition<sup>9</sup>, si bien que les témoignages à ce sujet ont plus de chance d'être fidèles que ceux qui attribuent à Aristote ou Théophraste des positions communes avec Xénocrate et Polémon. D'autre part, les deux passages groupent Aristote et Théophraste<sup>10</sup> et pourraient donc attribuer à tort au second la position du premier.

Il existe cependant deux autres témoignages qui évoquent seulement Théophraste et vont dans le même sens. Le premier est la fameuse lettre à Atticus citée ci-dessus<sup>11</sup>, selon laquelle Théophraste met le θεωρητικὸς βίος au-dessus de tous les autres. Le second est une scholie sur les dernières lignes du livre VI de l'*Ethique à Nicomaque*, où Aristote souligne que «la prudence ne domine pas la sagesse ni la meilleure partie [de l'âme], comme

<sup>8</sup> *De fin.* 5.11 & 72–73= 480A et 482 FHS&G : «ab Aristotele et Theophrasto mirabiliter laudatam esse rerum scientiam (...) vitae autem degendae ratio maxime quidem illis placuit quieta in contemplatione et cognitione posita rerum, quae quia deorum erat vitae simillima visa est dignissima». Cf. *De fin.* 4.11–13 sur le Lycée.

<sup>9</sup> Antiochus défendait la vie mixte (Augustin. *De civ. Dei* 29.3) et attribuait cette position à l'Ancienne Académie, estimant sans doute qu'Aristote et Théophraste l'avait infléchié dans un sens plus contemplatif. Pour une analyse de la position d'Antiochus, voir Bénatouil (2009) et Tsouni (2012).

<sup>10</sup> Huby (2001) 313. Sur ce type de témoignage cicéronien, voir Runia (1989).

<sup>11</sup> Sur le sens de ce passage dans son contexte cicéronien, voir l'article de Lévy, 67–68 dans ce volume.

la médecine [ne domine pas] la santé. En effet, elle n'en fait pas usage mais la fait au contraire advenir. [La prudence] donne des ordres en vue de [la sagesse], mais pas à [la sagesse]. [Sinon], ce serait en outre comme si on disait que la politique commande aux dieux, parce qu'elle donne des ordres à tout ce qui se trouve dans la cité » (*Eth. Nic.* 6.1145a6–9). Après avoir expliqué cette dernière analogie, en précisant que la politique supervise la construction des temples et les cultes sans pour autant donner des ordres aux dieux, la scholie ajoute :

Théophraste dit que la prudence est disposée à l'égard de la sagesse d'une manière comparable à celle qu'ont à l'égard de leurs maîtres les esclaves servant d'intendants pour leurs maîtres. Ils font en effet tout ce qu'il faut faire dans la maison afin que leurs maîtres aient du loisir pour [se consacrer à] des entreprises dignes d'hommes libres. Et la prudence arrange ce qui doit être fait afin que la sagesse ait le loisir pour la contemplation des choses qui ont le plus de valeur<sup>12</sup>.

Ce texte confirme d'abord la primauté accordée par Théophraste à la contemplation. Si la vie pratique guidée par la prudence est inévitable, elle doit être couronnée par l'activité contemplative, qui lui est supérieure<sup>13</sup>. En indiquant que la *σχολή* est nécessaire à la contemplation, Théophraste reprend également la position d'Aristote, qui fait de la contemplation la seule véritable activité de loisir<sup>14</sup>. Cette thèse de la fin du livre 10 permet à Théophraste de préciser la thèse de la fin du livre 6 : si la prudence opère « en vue de » la sagesse, c'est dans la mesure où la première peut, sait et doit réaliser les conditions nécessaires à l'activité contemplative.

<sup>12</sup> 461 FHS&G. La même analogie entre la prudence et l'intendant, la sagesse et le maître est exposée en *Magna Moralia* 1.34.31.1198b9 sq. On peut supposer que Théophraste a influencé le rédacteur des *Magna Moralia* sur ce point : voir Fortenbaugh (2011) 341–342, qui compare les deux passages. Cf. *Eth. Eud.* 8.3.1249b16–20.

<sup>13</sup> Cette perspective est confirmée par 466a et b FHS&G qui attribuent à Théophraste et ses partisans l'idée que l'éducation doit commencer par la morale avant de pouvoir en venir à la philosophie. Ces deux témoignages rapprochent sur ce point Théophraste de Platon.

<sup>14</sup> *Eth. Nic.* 10.7.1177b4–23. Voir aussi 481 FHS&G (déjà cité), où Cicéron, après avoir opposé Dicaërque et Théophraste, note que l'école de ce dernier « non seulement me permet de me retirer (*requiescam*) mais me reproche de ne pas avoir toujours été en repos ». On dispose de plusieurs témoignages qui montrent que Théophraste s'est effectivement soucié, pour lui-même et le Lycée mais aussi d'un point de vue général, du meilleur moyen de préserver le « loisir » nécessaire au philosophe : voir la lettre à Phánias sur les conditions d'enseignement de Théophraste (Diog. Laert. 5.37) et le témoignage d'Hermippe à ce sujet (Athen. *Deipn.* 1.38 21a–b = 12 FHS&G), la partie du testament de Théophraste concernant le Lycée (Diog. Laert. 5.52–53) et un passage du traité *Sur le mariage* (Hieronymus *adversus Iovianum* 1.47 = 486 FHS&G, t. II, p. 311, l. 11–13).

Tout en tenant compte de ces témoignages qui suggèrent nettement que Théophraste adoptait la position de la fin de l'*Ethique à Nicomaque*, W. Fortenbaugh (1983, 214–216) a invoqué un passage de Stobée pour attribuer à Théophraste une conception « inclusive » de la meilleure vie, à la manière de l'*Ethique à Eudème*, plutôt qu'exclusivement contemplative. Théophraste décrit en effet « l'homme qui veut être admiré pour sa relation à dieu » non seulement par ses sacrifices et activités de culte mais aussi par le fait de s'occuper de ses parents, sa femme et ses enfants<sup>15</sup>. Certes, Théophraste caractérise ailleurs la vie contemplative comme « divine », on va y revenir, mais il me semble impossible de faire porter l'extrait cité par Stobée sur cette vie la meilleure : il concerne explicitement une vertu traditionnelle particulière, la piété, et souligne que celle-ci ne se réduit pas aux actions expressément religieuses mais affecte également la vie familiale, ce qui n'implique absolument pas que la *meilleure* des vies combinent activité contemplative et activité pratique, mais pourrait impliquer une forme de solidarité entre vertus pratiques. Plus pertinent pourrait être cet autre témoignage :

Aristote, Théophraste et presque tous les Péripatéticiens ont quant à eux divisé la philosophie ainsi : il est nécessaire que l'homme parfait possède la théorie de ce qui est et la pratique de ce qu'il faut faire<sup>16</sup>.

Théophraste défendait-il dès lors une vie combinant action et contemplation ? Rien n'est moins sûr. D'une part, le témoignage concerne l'ensemble du Lycée et semble donc le reflet des positions des péripatéticiens hellénistiques qui ont attribué à Aristote la préférence pour le σύνθετος βίος<sup>17</sup>. D'autre part, le texte ne porte pas sur la meilleure des vies mais sur la division de la philosophie en une partie théorique et une partie pratique. Il en déduit que l'homme parfait doit être excellent dans les deux domaines, mais cela n'implique pas qu'ils ont la même valeur<sup>18</sup>, et n'est

<sup>15</sup> Stob. *Anth.* 3.3.42= 523 FHS&G. Voir aussi l'analyse de ce témoignage, et de celui cité dans la note suivante, par Fortenbaugh (2011).

<sup>16</sup> Ps.-Plut. *Plac. phil.* 874F= 479 FHS&G : 'Αριστοτέλης δὲ καὶ Θεόφραστος καὶ σχεδὸν πάντες οἱ Περιπατητικοὶ διείλοντο τὴν φιλοσοφίαν οὕτως· ἀναγκαῖον τὸν τέλειον ἄνδρα καὶ θεωρητικὸν εἶναι τῶν ὄντων καὶ πρακτικὸν τῶν δεόντων. La suite du passage donne des exemples de questions théoriques (biologiques, astronomiques, cosmologiques) que traite le théoricien, et de questions pratiques (éthiques, pédagogiques, politiques) qui concerne « l'homme pratique ».

<sup>17</sup> Voir Stob. *Anth.* 2.7.3g.6, 2.7.24.1–24 avec Tsouni (2012).

<sup>18</sup> Même les péripatéticiens hellénistiques ou Antiochus d'Ascalon, qui préfèrent la vie mixte, reconnaissent la supériorité de l'activité contemplative : voir la note précédente ainsi que Cic. *De fin.* 5.58 et Bénatouil (2009).



pas du tout incompatible avec une supériorité de la vie consacrée principalement à la contemplation<sup>19</sup>.

Théophraste aurait affirmé qu'« il est difficile de distinguer et de choisir la meilleure vie, mais beaucoup plus difficile et important, après avoir fait la distinction et le choix, de [les] maintenir »<sup>20</sup>. Rien ne permet d'attribuer à Théophraste une définition et un choix de la meilleure vie significativement différents de ceux d'Aristote<sup>21</sup> : les principaux éléments de la vie évoquée à la fin de l'*Éthique à Nicomaque* sont repris dans les témoignages. Il me semble que les apports ou corrections du disciple portent sur le second problème, qui n'est secondaire ou simplement pratique qu'en apparence. Conformément à la sentence qui vient d'être citée, Théophraste pourrait avoir été plus soucieux qu'Aristote de notre capacité à mener durablement et avec succès la vie la meilleure. Cicéron souligne souvent, à la suite d'Antiochus d'Ascalon, que Théophraste avait accordé une (trop) grande influence à la fortune dans le bonheur<sup>22</sup>. Il serait surprenant que cette thèse, qui ne remet pas en question la morale d'Aristote mais l'infléchit<sup>23</sup>, ait été strictement restreinte à la question des rapports entre les vertus morales et le bonheur et n'ait eu aucun effet sur la vie contemplative.

### III. Les obstacles au « bonheur divin »

Théophraste soutenait en effet, on l'a vu, que la prudence organise le loisir nécessaire à la contemplation, ce qui implique une dépendance relative de la vie contemplative à l'égard de la prudence, de même que le maître dépend en partie du travail de ses esclaves. Cicéron affirme que, dans son *Callisthène*, Théophraste faisait l'éloge de la sentence *Vitam regit fortuna, non sapientia*<sup>24</sup>. La sagesse dont il s'agit ici est sans doute soit l'ensemble de la sagesse humaine, soit la seule sagesse pratique, la φρόνησις, qui s'efforce

<sup>19</sup> Le fait d'écrire sur des questions éthiques ou politiques, comme Théophraste, n'implique pas non plus une relativisation de la vie contemplative, contrairement à ce que suggère Demont (1990) 385, mais juste un élargissement de ses objets aux affaires humaines.

<sup>20</sup> 476 FHS&G= *Codex Neapolitanus* II D 22, sent. 18.

<sup>21</sup> W. Fortenbaugh concède d'ailleurs ce point, puisque la position « inclusive » qu'il attribue à Théophraste est celle de l'*Éthique à Eudème* et non une position qui n'aurait pas été envisagée par Aristote.

<sup>22</sup> *Luc.* 134, *Tusc. Disp.* 5.24–25, *De fin.* 5.12, *Acad.* 1.33 et 35= 492, 493, 497, 498 FHS&G.

<sup>23</sup> Voir Annas (1993) 385–388, Fortenbaugh (1984) 212–228 et (2011) 418–458, ainsi que Prost (2001).

<sup>24</sup> *Cic. Tusc. Disp.* 5.25= 493 FHS&G.

de nous mener au bonheur mais ne peut pas, selon Théophraste, y parvenir seule. Elle pourrait donc être également entravée dans la mise en place des conditions requises par la contemplation, qui se trouverait ainsi indirectement affectée par la fortune.

Un passage des *Tusculanes* pourrait le confirmer :

Et puisque c'est dans le corps que se trouvent les désirs ardents qui allument en nous presque toutes les passions, et des passions d'autant plus dévorantes que nous jalousons ceux qui possèdent ce que nous voudrions posséder, assurément nous serons heureux quand nous aurons abandonné nos corps et ne connaîtrons plus ni passions ni jalousie ; et si à présent, quand nous sommes dégagés des soucis, nous sommes portés à regarder et à examiner quelque objet, alors il nous sera beaucoup plus loisible de le faire et de nous consacrer tout entier à la contemplation et à la recherche, parce qu'une curiosité vraiment insatiable du vrai est naturellement implantée dans nos esprits, et que les perspectives mêmes des lieux où nous serons parvenus, en nous facilitant la connaissances des réalités célestes accroîtront encore notre désir de les connaître. La beauté en est telle en effet que jusque sur la terre, elle a suscité cette philosophie « de nos pères et de nos grands-pères », comme dit Théophraste, allumée par le désir de connaissance. Mais en jouiront principalement ceux qui, dès le moment où ils séjourneraient sur la terre et tout plongés qu'ils étaient dans les ténèbres, n'en désiraient pas moins [les] percer au moyen de leur esprit aigu<sup>25</sup>.

Il est difficile de savoir ce qui vient de Théophraste dans ce témoignage, que j'ai cité tel qu'il apparaît dans les recueils récents. Au minimum, Théophraste a présenté comme très ancienne une forme de philosophie contemplative fondée sur notre désir naturel de connaître et excitée par notre admiration pour les astres<sup>26</sup>. Théophraste serait donc intervenu dans les débats sur les origines de la philosophie et la nature des premiers sages qui semblent avoir beaucoup occupé l'Académie et le Lycée, et il aurait

<sup>25</sup> *Tusc. Disp.* 1.44–45 = 484 FHS&G (traduction de J. Humbert modifiée) : « quodque nunc facimus, cum laxati curis sumus, ut spectare aliquid velimus et visere, id multo tum faciemus liberius totosque nos in contemplandis rebus perspicendisque ponemus, propterea quod et natura inest in mentibus nostris insatiabilis quaedam cupiditas veri videndi et orae ipsae locorum illorum, quo pervenerimus, quo faciliorem nobis cognitionem rerum caelestium, eo maiorem cognoscendi cupiditatem dabunt. Haec enim pulchritudo etiam in terris “patritam illam et avitam”, ut ait Theophrastus, philosophiam cognitionis cupiditate incensam excitavit. Praecipue vero fruentur ea qui tum etiam, cum has terras incolentes circumfusi erant caligine, tamen acie mentis dispicere cupiebant ».

<sup>26</sup> Sur les autres témoignages confirmant l'importance de la connaissance des astres du fait de leur divinité et de leur régularité, voir Fortenbaugh (1984) 207 et (2011) 404. On notera que dans la scholie de l'*Ethique à Nicomaque* citée plus haut, la contemplation est également définie par la valeur de ses objets (θεωρίαν τῶν τιμιωτάτων) et que cette valeur revient dans le témoignage de Proclus à propos du ciel cité ci-dessous.

pris position en faveur d'une origine contemplative, comme Héraclide du Pont et contre Dicéarque<sup>27</sup>.

Peut-on aller plus loin et attribuer à Théophraste tout le début du passage, et donc une position digne du *Phédon*, selon laquelle le bonheur suppose la séparation du corps et de l'âme, qui seule permet une contemplation durable et complète de la vérité? Ce serait assurément imprudent. D'autres témoignages confirment néanmoins que Théophraste soulignait que les passions sont des obstacles sérieux au bonheur *de l'âme*:

Je crains que ne soit vrai ce que Théophraste disait de la fortune, de la peine, de la douleur corporelle, dont il pensait qu'elles ne pouvaient absolument pas être compatibles avec la vie heureuse<sup>28</sup>.

Théophraste, tout au contraire [de Démocrite], a dit que son séjour dans le corps coûte cher à l'âme. Pour un temps réduit, elle paye un lourd salaire: peines, craintes, désirs, jalousies, qu'elle supporte [en étant] avec le corps, si bien qu'elle pourrait plus justement lui faire un procès pour mutilation, du fait des choses qu'elle a oubliées, pour contrainte, du fait de son emprisonnement, pour outrage, du fait de la mauvaise réputation et des reproches qu'elle endure, parce qu'on la tient injustement pour responsable des maux du corps<sup>29</sup>.

Quoique le second témoignage rapporte sans doute une critique de la parabole démocritéenne du procès du corps à l'encontre l'âme, il indique nettement que Théophraste considérait les passions comme des entraves imposées à l'âme par le corps. Le premier témoignage montre qu'il invoquait les passions parmi les nombreux accidents compromettant le bonheur humain dans son fameux traité *Sur le bonheur*. Dès lors, il me semble possible de considérer le début du texte des *Tusculanes* comme rendant également compte de la position de Théophraste.

Reste la description de la vie contemplative parfaite de l'âme séparée du corps. Proclus témoigne du fait que Théophraste considérait bien la vie la meilleure comme caractéristique du premier ciel en tant qu'il est divin:

Car [Théophraste] admet lui aussi que le ciel est animé et, pour cette raison, divin. En effet, dit-il, s'il est divin, il a l'existence la meilleure (τὴν ἀρίστην ἔχει διαγωγὴν)<sup>30</sup>, il est animé: car rien de ce qui a une grande valeur (τίμιον) n'est sans âme, comme il l'écrit dans son *Du ciel*<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> Voir Jaeger (1948), White (2001) et 3–5 de ce volume.

<sup>28</sup> Cic. *De fin.* 5.77= 495 FHS&G.

<sup>29</sup> Ps.-Plut. *De libidine et aegritudine* 2= 440A FHS&G.

<sup>30</sup> L'expression διαγωγὴ ἀρίστη est utilisée par Aristote en *Met.* Λ.7.1072b14 à propos de l'activité intellectuelle du premier moteur, que nous pouvons partager brièvement.

<sup>31</sup> Procl. *In Tim.* 2.120.8–22= 159 FHS&G. Cf. Cic. *De nat. deor.* 1.35= 252A FHS&G sur la divinité de l'esprit et des cieux selon Théophraste.

La vie contemplative humaine constituerait donc une imitation de cette vie divine<sup>32</sup>. Bien que tout ceci semble très platonicien, il faut noter qu'un titre cité par Diogène Laërce, *Sur le bonheur divin, contre ceux de l'Académie*<sup>33</sup>, laisse penser que Théophraste se distinguait de Platon et ses successeurs à ce sujet, peut-être par son pessimisme à l'égard de notre capacité à imiter les dieux. Théophraste aurait affirmé qu'«on peut à bon droit déposer plainte contre toute vie. Car tout [bien] est petit, faible, bref et mélangé de peine»<sup>34</sup>. Ce témoignage est sujet à caution, car une sentence presque identique est attribuée à Antiphon<sup>35</sup>, mais Théophraste peut l'avoir reprise à son compte<sup>36</sup>. Or elle concerne *toute vie* et implique donc que même les contacts avec le divin procurés par la contemplation sont trop limités pour nous faire échapper aux peines communes à tous les hommes. Le passage des *Tusculanes* souligne de même que le corps nous prive du vrai bonheur et que notre contemplation demeure toujours imparfaite, même si elle constitue le meilleur moyen pour nous préparer à la vie «divine».

Aristote note certes déjà que, contrairement aux dieux, nous ne pouvons accéder à la contemplation que très brièvement<sup>37</sup>, mais il souligne également que la contemplation est une activité continue, procurant des plaisirs purs et stables et «auto-suffisante», si bien qu'elle n'a quasiment pas besoin de biens extérieurs<sup>38</sup>. Cette dernière thèse, qui tend à rendre la seule vie contemplative indépendante de la fortune, n'est jamais attribuée à Théophraste. On trouve plusieurs témoignages à propos de l'indépendance relative du sage à l'égard de la fortune :

Parmi tous les hommes, seul celui qui est éduqué (*doctum*) n'est ni exilé dans les lieux étrangers ni en manque d'amis quand il perd les membres de sa

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Cic. *De fin.* 5.72–73= 482 FHS&G (cité ci-dessus) et Iulian. *Oratio* 9.5; 185a–b= 483 FHS&G.

<sup>33</sup> Diog. Laert. 5.49: Περὶ τῆς θείας εὐδαιμονίας πρὸς τοὺς ἐξ Ἀκαδημείας α'. Certains éditeurs estiment qu'il y a là deux titres et ajoutent un α' après εὐδαιμονίας, mais les manuscrits n'indiquent rien de tel. S'agit-il d'un ouvrage sur la vie parfaite des dieux ou sur le bonheur de l'homme qui imite ou connaît dieu? William Fortenbaugh (1984) 101 adopte la seconde interprétation: il note que le titre n'est pas Περὶ τοῦ θεοῦ εὐδαιμονίας et renvoie à des passages d'Aristote désignant la vie contemplative comme «divine». Le passage du traité *Du ciel* cité par Proclus est également dirigé contre Platon. J'y reviens à la fin de cet article, pp. 35–36.

<sup>34</sup> 477 FHS&G= *Codex Neopolitanus* II D 22, sent. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Antiphon 87B51 DK= Stob. *Anth.* 4.36.56. Je remercie Mauro Bonazzi de m'avoir signalé ce parallèle.

<sup>36</sup> On trouve des thèses proches en Diog. Laert. 5.40–41 cité n. 85 et *Met.* 18.8a24–27.

<sup>37</sup> *Met.* Λ.7.1072b14.

<sup>38</sup> *Eth. Nic.* 10.7.1177a21–25 et 1178b3–6.

famille et ses serviteurs, mais il est citoyen de toutes les cités et peut mépriser sans peur les sévères aléas de la fortune<sup>39</sup>.

Théophraste dans son livre de *Commentaires* : le propre du sage est qu'aucune passion ne peut entrer dans son esprit, car la passion corporelle est opposée à tout jugement et sagesse (*omni quidem consilio sapientiaeque*)<sup>40</sup>.

Il n'est pas du tout certain que ces témoignages reflètent les positions de Théophraste<sup>41</sup>. Mais, même s'ils étaient fiables, ils n'impliquent pas l'invulnérabilité de la vie contemplative. Il se pourrait certes que *doctus, sapientia* désignent la sagesse théorique et que Théophraste ait donc admis la thèse de Platon selon laquelle la contemplation rend en elle-même son possesseur indifférent à la fortune<sup>42</sup>. Mais il me semble plus probable que ces deux passages se réfèrent surtout à la vertu morale et à la sagesse pratique, et que Théophraste ait juste soutenu, comme Aristote<sup>43</sup>, que la vertu résiste aux aléas de la fortune (sans pour autant suffire au bonheur).

Deux témoignages arabes sur les effets de la « philosophie » semblent en revanche se référer plutôt voire exclusivement à la sagesse théorique<sup>44</sup> :

[Théophraste] dit : quand l'âme se décharge du poids des pensées du monde qui l'empêchent de se mouvoir vers la chose la meilleure, elle aborde la philosophie avec moins d'effort et plus de facilité et devient comme une lampe qui est lumineuse en elle-même et lumineuse pour les autres, et quand l'ignorant s'attache à elle (sc. la philosophie), il devient savant, et quand le pauvre la suit, il devient riche, et plus l'âme s'élève, plus elle augmente en science, et on rencontre abondance de richesses<sup>45</sup>.

On lui demanda s'il valait mieux rechercher la richesse ou rechercher la philosophie, et il dit : la philosophie est la richesse de l'âme, tandis que la possession est la richesse du corps, et il vaut mieux rechercher la richesse de l'âme, parce que, quand elle est riche, [l'âme] perdure, et donc la richesse de l'âme est étendue, tandis que la richesse du corps est limitée<sup>46</sup>.

Dans le premier, la libération à l'égard des passions est tenue pour une condition (plutôt qu'une conséquence) de la contemplation, comme le

<sup>39</sup> Vitruv. *De Architectura* 6, *Intr.* 2= 491 FHS&G.

<sup>40</sup> *Lumen animae* B.63, *De sapientia*, E= 448 FHS&G.

<sup>41</sup> Fortenbaugh (2011) 431 et 283 attribue le premier passage à une exagération polémique de Théophraste (contre Dicéarque) et le second à la mauvaise information de cette source médiévale, qui attribuerait à Théophraste une doctrine stoïcienne.

<sup>42</sup> Voir *Resp.* 6.486a–b ou *Theaet.* 173d–175e.

<sup>43</sup> *Eth. Nic.* 1.11.1100b30–35.

<sup>44</sup> Je suis très reconnaissant à Frédérique Woerther qui a bien voulu traduire ces témoignages arabes en français et discuter de leur sens avec moi.

<sup>45</sup> Šiwān al-ḥikma, *cap. de Theophrasto, dictum* n° 4= 485 FHS&G.

<sup>46</sup> Šiwān al-ḥikma, *cap. de Theophrasto, dictum* n° 16= 509 FHS&G.

loisir dans la scholie de l'*Éthique à Nicomaque* ou le « relâchement des soucis » dans le passage des *Tusculanes*, que rappelle également l'analogie de la lumière<sup>47</sup>. Dès lors, la contemplation demeurerait pour Théophraste dépendante de la vertu morale, en ce sens qu'elle présupposerait le loisir mais surtout l'impassibilité, donc l'action de la tempérance et de la prudence, pour pouvoir se déployer<sup>48</sup>. Ce déploiement pourrait à son tour lui-même renforcer l'indépendance de l'âme à l'égard du corps et de la fortune, comme le suggère le second témoignage. D. Gutas semble y voir une allusion à la survie après la mort de l'âme enrichie par la philosophie (FHS&G 509 : « it survives »), ce qui pourrait confirmer le témoignage des *Tusculanes*. Mais le terme *baqîta* n'a pas forcément ce sens, et il vaut donc mieux rester prudent et considérer qu'il désigne ici l'intensification et le bon usage de la vie de l'âme grâce à la philosophie<sup>49</sup>. On verra plus loin que la durée de la vie humaine semble avoir été un problème important pour Théophraste, y compris du point de vue de la philosophie.

Il n'est pas aisé de situer la position de Théophraste sur la vie contemplative par rapport à celle d'Aristote, et ce d'autant plus que cette dernière n'est pas limpide. Il me semble indéniable que Théophraste retenait la hiérarchie de l'*Éthique à Nicomaque* entre activité théorique ou intellectuelle et activité pratique, et qu'il considérait la vie contemplative comme la meilleure. Il jugeait néanmoins les vertus morales et la prudence indispensables, non seulement pour les activités pratiques nécessaires à toute vie, mais sans doute également pour mettre en place les conditions favorables à la vie contemplative. Il pourrait avoir cependant été beaucoup moins optimiste qu'Aristote sur la possibilité de réunir durablement ces conditions sociales et psychologiques, à cause du poids des peines liées au corps dans la vie humaine.

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<sup>47</sup> Fortenbaugh (2011) 407–408 rapproche et compare le premier témoignage arabe et celui des *Tusculanes*.

<sup>48</sup> Cette position semble esquissée par Aristote en *Pol.* 7.15.1334a22–28. Je me permets de renvoyer à ce sujet à Bénatouïl (2011) 173–176.

<sup>49</sup> Fortenbaugh (2011) 487 comprend qu'il s'agit du maintien de la sagesse au milieu des turbulences, mais il s'agit là plutôt de la richesse de l'âme elle-même que de ses effets. Sur la capacité du sage à bien gérer son temps et donc à mieux en profiter, voir *Codex Neapolitanus* II D 22, sent. 18, cité plus haut p. 23, et *Şiwān al-ḥikma*, *cap. de Theophrasto, dictum* n° 18, 19= 458, 459 et 476 FHS&G.

IV. *Les limites naturelles de notre intellect*

Reste maintenant à déterminer si cette conception éthique de la vie contemplative avait sa contre-partie psychologique. Il n'est pas question d'analyser en détail ni même d'exposer de manière synthétique les positions de Théophraste quant à la nature et à l'activité de l'intellect. Je voudrais juste attirer l'attention sur certains témoignages qui suggèrent que, comme en éthique, Théophraste retenait dans ce domaine les positions d'Aristote mais pourrait avoir souligné les faiblesses des capacités contemplatives humaines.

Théophraste accepte-t-il<sup>50</sup> les thèses constitutives de la doctrine aristotélécienne du νοῦς<sup>51</sup> : le fait qu'il ne dépend pas du corps<sup>52</sup>, qu'il est « divin »<sup>53</sup>, que son activité est autonome<sup>54</sup>, qu'il connaît ses objets en s'identifiant à eux<sup>55</sup>. Toutes ces thèses sont liées entre elles et justifie la fameuse distinction entre un intellect patient et un intellect producteur, ainsi que l'immortalité ou l'éternité du second. Ce n'est pas sur cette dernière thèse, très débattue mais qui semble accordée sans difficulté par Théophraste<sup>56</sup>, que je voudrais m'attarder, mais sur une autre, selon laquelle l'intellect est « toujours vrai »<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>50</sup> Les analyses de Théophraste citées par Thémistius et Priscien se présentent comme des suites de problèmes. Il est donc difficile de savoir si les affirmations de Théophraste sur lesquelles s'achève une citation sont définitives ou étaient soumises dans la suite de son analyse à de nouvelles mises en question. Théophraste reprend néanmoins la plupart des thèses fondamentales d'Aristote sur l'intellect et semble nettement reconnaître leur légitimité, comme le montre bien Movia (1968) 38–54. Son argumentation aporétique n'implique donc pas une critique d'Aristote, mais semble plutôt destinée à expliquer les analyses du *De anima* 3.4–5 : voir Devereux (1992) 32 et Movia (1968) 66. Gabbe (2008) estime que, ce faisant, Théophraste rejette certaines thèses d'Aristote.

<sup>51</sup> *De an.* 1.4.408b18–30 et 3.4–5.

<sup>52</sup> Simpl. *In Phys.* 964.29= 271 FHS&G.

<sup>53</sup> Voir le témoignage de Proclus déjà cité p. 25 (159 FHS&G), ainsi que celui de Simplicius mentionné dans la note précédente.

<sup>54</sup> Théophraste pose sans ambiguïté cette autonomie en 271–272 FHS&G (Simpl. *In Phys.* 964.29 et Šiwān al-ḥikma, *cap. de Theophrasto, dictum* n° 3), et la reconnaît comme une exigence en 307A FHS&G= Them. *In De an.* 108.1–7, où il discute, à propos de *De anima* 3.4–5, du problème de savoir si ce sont les objets de l'intellect ou l'intellect lui-même qui le font passer de la puissance à l'acte.

<sup>55</sup> Voir *Met.* 25.9b13 cité ci-dessous p. 32, et surtout Priscianus, *Metaphrasis in Theophr.* *De an. disp., Suppl. Arist.*, I-2, p. 37, 24–30= 319 FHS&G.

<sup>56</sup> Voir Them. *In De an.* 108.18= 320A, cité p. 30, et 324 FHS&G, où Averroës attribue même à Théophraste la thèse que « l'intellect matériel survit » (*Comm. magnum in Met.* Λ.3.1070a25–27, p. 1489, 1–6 Bouyges). On aurait donc là une confirmation de la référence à la vie de l'âme après la mort dans le passage des *Tusculanes*.

<sup>57</sup> Aristot. *An. Post.* 2.19.100b7.

Cette thèse est expliquée par le fait que l'intellect a pour objet des principes non-composés ou indivisibles, à propos desquels l'erreur n'est pas possible<sup>58</sup>. La thèse ouvre le chapitre 6 du livre 3 du *De anima*<sup>59</sup>, et Aristote semble bien la présenter comme une conséquence de ce qui précède, à savoir de l'un des passages les plus fameux et les plus discutés de son œuvre, qui concerne la distinction et la relation entre l'intellect producteur et l'intellect patient: Aristote y mentionne la séparation, l'immortalité et l'éternité du premier, puis évoque sans précision le fait que « nous ne souvenons pas », et rapporte ce défaut à la corruptibilité de l'intellect patient<sup>60</sup>. Certains interprètes y ont vu une allusion au fait que l'intellect agent ne se souviendra plus de notre vie après notre mort, mais on a du mal à croire qu'Aristote pourrait se référer à cela de manière aussi elliptique et comme à un fait avéré. Il s'agit sans doute plutôt de désigner les faiblesses qui affectent parfois notre pensée, et de souligner qu'elles ne résultent pas de l'intellect producteur en lui-même, mais de l'intellect patient<sup>61</sup>. Il est ainsi possible d'enchaîner sur le fait que l'intellection des indivisibles exclut l'erreur.

Théophraste discute l'ensemble de cette analyse d'Aristote dans un témoignage de Thémistius:

Car l'intellect est d'une certaine manière un mélange de l'intellect producteur et de l'intellect en puissance. Dès lors, si l'intellect moteur est connatuel, il doit avoir été ainsi [= moteur] à la fois (a) tout de suite et (b) toujours. Mais (a) s'il est postérieur, à cause de quoi et comment a eu lieu son engendrement? Il semble bien qu'il soit inengendré, puisqu'il est incorruptible. Alors, comme il est immanent, (b) pourquoi n'est-il pas toujours [moteur]? Pourquoi l'oubli, l'illusion et l'erreur? Est-ce à cause du mélange<sup>62</sup>?

<sup>58</sup> Aristot. *Mét.* Θ.10.1051b26sq.

<sup>59</sup> Aristot. *De an.* 3.6.430b26: Ἡ μὲν οὖν τῶν ἀδιαίρετων νόησις ἐν τοῦτοις περὶ ἃ οὐκ ἔστι τὸ ψεύδος [...]. Sur cette thèse, voir Berti (1996).

<sup>60</sup> *De an.* 3.5.430a17–25: χωρισθεὶς δ' ἐστὶ μόνον τοῦθ' ὅπερ ἐστί, καὶ τοῦτο μόνον ἀθάνατον καὶ αἰδίον, οὐ μνημονεύομεν δέ, ὅτι τοῦτο μὲν ἀπαθές, ὁ δὲ παθητικὸς νοῦς φαρτός· καὶ ἄνευ τούτου οὐθὲν νοεῖ.

<sup>61</sup> Deux passages précédents vont dans ce sens. En *De an.* 1.4.408b18–30, la distinction entre les deux intellects est absente, mais sont nettement distinguées l'intelligence en elle-même, qui est divine et ne s'affecte pas, et « quelque autre chose en nous » qui dépérit avec la vieillesse. Voir aussi *De an.* 3.4.430a4–5: ἐπὶ μὲν γὰρ τῶν ἄνευ ὕλης τὸ αὐτὸ ἐστὶ τὸ νοοῦν καὶ τὸ νοούμενον· ἢ γὰρ ἐπιστήμη ἢ θεωρητικὴ καὶ τὸ οὕτως ἐπιστητὸν τὸ αὐτὸ ἐστὶν (τοῦ δὲ μὴ αἰεὶ νοεῖν τὸ αἴτιον ἐπισκεπτέον). L'intellect en acte est identique à son objet, lorsque celui-ci est sans matière, ce qui oblige à se demander pourquoi notre intellect ne pense pas toujours. Sur la réponse à cette question, voir ci-dessous pp. 32–33.

<sup>62</sup> Them. In *De an.* 108.18= 320A FHS&G: ἀψάμενος δὲ καὶ τῶν περὶ τοῦ ποιητικοῦ νοῦ διωρισμένων Ἀριστοτέλει ἑκείνῳ φησὶν [ὁ Θεόφραστος] ἐπισκεπτέον, ὃ δὴ φαμεν ἐν πάσῃ φύσει τὸ



Théophraste semble bien reconnaître que l'intellect *moteur en nous* ne pense pas toujours. Aristote ne le nie évidemment pas<sup>63</sup>, mais renvoie cette faiblesse au niveau du seul intellect patient, et en immunise l'intellect producteur, que ce dernier soit transcendant à l'âme humaine ou qu'il réside en elle sans se « mélanger » à l'intellect patient : l'idée que l'intellect est « sans mélange » (ἀμιγής) est très présente en *De an.* 3.4–5 (429a18, 430a18). Théophraste ne la contredit pas forcément, puisqu'il ne parle que d'un certain mélange *entre* deux formes ou aspects de l'intellect, mais il pourrait vouloir nuancer l'analyse d'Aristote : l'intellect producteur est mélangé (en nous) à l'intellect patient, ce qui modifie sa nature sans pour autant le détruire<sup>64</sup>. Les témoignages suggèrent par ailleurs que Théophraste soutenait que l'intellect producteur est immanent à notre âme<sup>65</sup>. Cette position le conduirait donc à reconnaître plus nettement les aléas humains de l'activité intellectuelle, y compris au niveau de l'intellect producteur. De même que tout bien, dans la vie humaine, est « mêlé de peine », de même notre activité intellectuelle serait toujours « mêlée » de passivité et donc d'erreurs.

Est-ce à dire que Théophraste refusait la thèse aristotélicienne de la connaissance immédiate des principes par l'intellect ? Il évoque cette question dans sa *Métaphysique* :

μὲν ὡς ὕλην καὶ δυνάμει, τὸ δὲ αἴτιον καὶ ποιητικόν, καὶ ὅτι αἰετιμώτερον τὸ ποιοῦν τοῦ πάσχοντος, καὶ ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς ὕλης. ταῦτα μὲν ἀποδέχεται, διαπορεῖ δέ. τίνε οὖν αὐταὶ αἱ δύο φύσεις; καὶ τί πάλιν τὸ ὑποκειμενὸν ἢ συνηρητμένον τῷ ποιητικῷ; μικτὸν γάρ πως ὁ νοῦς ἔκ τε τοῦ ποιητικοῦ καὶ τοῦ δυνάμει. εἰ μὲν οὖν σύμφυτος ὁ κινῶν, καὶ εὐθύς ἐχρῆν καὶ αἰεῖ. εἰ δὲ ὕστερον, μετὰ τίνος καὶ πῶς ἡ γένεσις; ἔοικε δ' οὖν ὡς ἀγέννητος, εἴπερ καὶ ἀφθαρτος. ἐνυπάρχων δ' οὖν διὰ τί οὐκ αἰεῖ; ἢ διὰ τί λήθη καὶ ἀπάτη καὶ ψεῦδος; ἢ διὰ τὴν μίξιν. Cf. Averroes *Comm. magnum in De an.* 3.4.429a21–24, CCAA, pp. 390–391 Crawford = 308A FHS&G, t. II, p. 62, l. 69–70.

<sup>63</sup> Voir *De an.* 3.4.430a5 cité ci-dessus n. 61.

<sup>64</sup> Voir Devereux (1992) 41–42, qui s'appuie sur la conception aristotélicienne du mélange en *De gen. et corr.* 328a28–31. Cette interprétation a été critiquée par Gabbe (2008), qui pense que Théophraste ne distingue pas deux intellects « mélangés » entre eux, mais décrit l'intellect comme une disposition (acquise) à rendre les choses intelligibles, qui recèle à la fois de la puissance et de l'acte sans être pour autant divisée. Contrairement à celle de Devereux, cette lecture n'explique pas clairement pourquoi Théophraste invoque le « mélange » pour expliquer les faiblesses de notre pensée, à moins qu'il s'agisse simplement pour lui de dire qu'une disposition, en tant qu'intermédiaire entre la puissance et l'acte, peut avoir des ratés, contrairement à un acte pur (Cf. Priscianus *Metaphrasis in Theophr. De an. disp., Suppl. Arist.*, I-2, p. 26, 5–7 = 307B FHS&G : « il faut donc prendre aussi “en puissance” dans un sens analogique à propos de l'intellect de l'âme, car c'est par rapport à l'intellect en acte, à savoir celui qui est séparé »). Dans ce cas, du point de vue du problème qui m'intéresse ici, les interprétations opposées de Devereux et Gabbe seraient équivalentes, dans la mesure où elles admettraient toutes les deux que c'est la nature « mélangée » de l'intellect en nous qui le rend faillible. Sur ce point, voir aussi Movia (1968) 54–61.

<sup>65</sup> Voir 320A et 271 FHS&G avec Movia (1968) 61–65.

Donc nous pouvons jusqu'à un certain point connaître les choses par leur cause, en prenant notre point de départ dans les sensations. Mais quand nous en venons aux êtres suprêmes et premiers eux-mêmes, nous ne le pouvons plus, soit parce qu'ils n'ont pas de cause, soit du fait de notre faiblesse face à ce qui est comme éblouissant. Mais [l'explication] plus vraie est peut-être celle-ci, à savoir que la contemplation des êtres de ce type a lieu par l'intellect lui-même et comme en les saisissant, ce pourquoi il n'y a pas d'illusion à leur sujet<sup>66</sup>.

Pourquoi ne connaissons-nous pas les êtres premiers par leurs causes? Théophraste résiste à l'hypothèse platonicienne selon laquelle il existe un principe ultime situé au-delà et rendant compte des êtres premiers<sup>67</sup> (tel le Bien par rapport aux Formes en *République* 7), mais nous sommes impuissants à le saisir à cause du décalage entre la nature de ce principe et les capacités de nos esprits, sans doute trop habitués à l'obscurité du sensible. Le successeur d'Aristote préfère supposer, comme son maître au début et à la fin des *Seconds analytiques*, que notre intellect saisit directement et infailliblement les principes.

En excluant l'hypothèse de notre «faiblesse» d'esprit, ce passage de la *Métaphysique* semble à première vue remettre en question le témoignage des *Tusculanes*, qui souligne notre difficulté à accéder aux êtres les meilleurs. Ce dernier n'affirme toutefois pas que notre âme est trop faible pour se hisser jusqu'au niveau des principes, mais plutôt qu'elle ne dispose généralement pas des *conditions optimales* (loisir, impassibilité, position cosmologique) pour exercer une activité contemplative qui est inscrite dans sa nature même. Plus problématique est le fait que le passage de la *Métaphysique* exclut l'ἀπάτη à l'égard des principes, alors que l'ἀπάτη de l'intellect est invoquée dans le témoignage de Themistius (320FHS&G). Pour éviter une contradiction, il faut supposer que les deux textes ne portent pas sur les mêmes objets. Les principes seraient saisis directement et sans «illusion» par l'intellect en nous, qui pourrait néanmoins sans doute les oublier, mais il existerait d'autres objets intelligibles qui ne sont pas «touchés» directement et à propos desquels notre intellect pourrait se tromper.

<sup>66</sup> Theophr. *Met.* 9b8–16: μέχρι μὲν οὖν τινὸς δυνάμεθα δι' αἰτίου θεωρεῖν, ἀρχὰς ἀπὸ τῶν αἰσθήσεων λαμβάνοντες· ὅταν δὲ ἐπ' αὐτὰ τὰ ἄκρα καὶ πρῶτα μεταβαίνωμεν, οὐκέτι δυνάμεθα, εἴτε διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν αἰτίαν εἴτε διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν ἀσθένειαν ὥσπερ πρὸς τὰ φωτεινότατα βλέπειν. τάχα δ' ἐκείνο ἀληθέστερον ὡς αὐτῷ τῷ νῷ τῶν τοιούτων ἡ θεωρία θιγόντι καὶ οἷον ἀψαμένῳ, διὸ καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀπάτη περὶ αὐτά. J'utilise l'édition Laks-Most (1993) de la *Métaphysique*.

<sup>67</sup> Laks-Most (1993) 70 n. 45, excluent cette interprétation «puisque'elle suppose que les

Ces seconds objets pourraient être les formes ou essences qui ne sont pas séparées d'une matière et pour lesquelles l'identification entre la science et son objet n'est donc pas possible. Priscien rapporte en effet qu'Aristote et Théophraste s'interrogeaient sur ces cas et se demandaient comment leur connaissance diffère de celle des intelligibles sans matière. Son témoignage ne mentionne aucune difficulté cognitive, mais il s'achève allusivement sur un parallèle entre séparabilité à l'égard de la matière et rapport à l'intellect<sup>68</sup>, qui pourrait être compris comme indiquant que plus l'intelligible est mélangé avec la matière, plus l'intellect a du mal à le saisir et risque les erreurs, oublis ou illusions à son sujet. Averroës et Thomas d'Aquin attribuent d'ailleurs à Aristote cette explication du fait que l'intellect en nous ne pense pas toujours<sup>69</sup>.

Il y aurait donc deux « mélanges » à l'origine des difficultés ou échecs de notre connaissance intellectuelle. L'un, *a parte subjecti*, entre intellect patient et producteur en nous, l'autre, *a parte objecti*, entre les formes et la matière. Si l'on admet cette interprétation, la question des limites de la contemplation se pose non seulement d'un point de vue éthique et psychologique (et/ou épistémologique), mais aussi d'un point de vue métaphysique ou cosmologique.

### V. Une limite cosmologique ?

Trouve-t-on des textes de Théophraste qui vont dans ce sens ? Dans son traité sur les principes connu sous le nom de *Métaphysique*, Théophraste s'interroge sur l'existence d'une « connexion et comme [d']une communauté mutuelle entre les intelligibles et les êtres naturels » (4a10). Bien qu'il

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premiers principes aient eux-mêmes une cause», mais, c'est précisément ce que Théophraste reproche à Platon selon Procl. *In Tim.* 2.120.8–22= 159 FHS&G. J'y reviens pp. 35–36.

<sup>68</sup> Priscian. *Metaphrasis in Theophr. De an. disp., Suppl. Arist.*, I-2, p. 32, 25–27, 29–33, p. 33, 25–27, pp. 33, 32–34, 2= 318 FHS&G: Ἐφεξῆς δὲ καὶ αὐτός, ὥσπερ ὁ Ἀριστοτέλης, τιθέμενος ἓνα μὲν αἴναι τῶν εἰδῶν, ἐφ' ᾧ ταυτὸν αὐτό τε ἔκαστον καὶ τὸ εἶναι αὐτῷ. [...] ἓνα δὲ ἔνυλα, ἐφ' ᾧ ἕτερον αὐτό καὶ τὸ εἶναι αὐτῷ· κατὰ γὰρ τὸ συναμφοτέρον αὐτό, τὸ δὲ εἶναι πάλιν κατὰ τὸ εἶδος· ἐπειδὴ ἀμφοτέρων θεωρητικὸς ὁ δυνάμει νοῦς, ζητεῖ, <πῶς ἐκάτερα>, καὶ <πῶς τὰ ἐν ὕλῃ καὶ ἀφαιρέσει>· καὶ γὰρ αὐτὰ τὰ ἔνυλα ἢ κατὰ τὸ συναμφοτέρον ἢ κατὰ μόνον θεωρεῖ τὸ εἶδος. [...] Ἄρα οὖν ἐτέρῳ ἢ ἐτέρως ἔχοντι κρίνει τὰ τε αἴναι καὶ τὰ ἔνυλα, καὶ τὰ ἐν ὕλῃ αὐ καὶ τὰ ἐξ ἀφαιρέσεως, ἢ τῷ αὐτῷ καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχοντι; ἢ ἀμφω ἀληθῆ [...]. Ὅλως δὲ ὡς χωριστὰ τὰ πράγματα τῆς ὕλης, οὕτω καὶ τὰ περὶ τὸν νοῦν ἀμφοτέροι ἀποφαίνονται ὅ τε Ἀριστοτέλης καὶ ὁ Θεόφραστος.

<sup>69</sup> Voir Averroës, *Comm. magnum in De an.* 3.16 ad 430a5–9 et Thomas Aquinas, *In De an.* 3.3, ad 430a5: «restat ut consideretur “causa non semper intelligendi”, id est quare non semper intelligibile intelligit. Quod ideo est, quia in rebus habentibus materiam, species non est intelligibilis secundum actum, sed secundum potentiam tantum».

pose le problème d'abord au niveau ontologique et cosmologique, il a également des enjeux épistémologiques, puisque sa solution affecte la possibilité et le contenu de notre connaissance théorique. On le voit dans la dernière partie de l'ouvrage (à partir du chapitre 22, 9a10), qui s'interroge sur la diversité de notre connaissance, et en particulier sur la question de savoir « où il faut placer la limite » (9b19–20 : ἐν τίνι ποιητέον τὸν ὅρον) lorsque l'on cherche la raison (ch. 26–28), ou la finalité (ch. 28–34) ou l'ordre (ch. 34) des phénomènes naturels. Or, il est bien connu que Théophraste ne fait pas preuve d'optimisme épistémologique dans ces chapitres : il insiste sur l'existence de nombreux phénomènes naturels, et même célestes<sup>70</sup>, qui résistent à l'explication rationnelle ou finale<sup>71</sup>. Il y aurait donc bien une certaine opacité de la nature, liée à l'indétermination de la matière<sup>72</sup>, qui nous empêcherait d'y saisir l'ordre ou la finalité requis pour la comprendre et contempler.

Notons d'abord que cette analyse est bien différente de la position platonicienne critiquée à propos de la connaissance des êtres premiers. Théophraste ne dit pas que les principes les plus élevés nous sont très difficiles d'accès du fait de l'hétérogénéité entre leur nature parfaite et l'imperfection de la nôtre (ou de notre situation), mais au contraire que nous avons du mal à saisir des formes-raisons dans les phénomènes naturels que nous avons sous les yeux. Il existe d'ailleurs sans doute un lien étroit, selon Théophraste, entre la critique de l'épistémologie platonicienne et la résolution du problème des « limites » de la rationalisation du réel. Le chapitre 26 s'ouvre sur une référence à un point « difficile » dont l'établissement est requis pour traiter certaines questions particulières et importantes<sup>73</sup>. Les traducteurs

<sup>70</sup> Voir *Met.* 10a27, 11b17 et Sharples (2002) 24 n. 111.

<sup>71</sup> Voir Lennox (1985). Bien qu'ils estiment qu'Aristote, dans ses œuvres biologiques, répond aux doutes de Théophraste, si bien que les derniers chapitres de la *Métaphysique* ne pourraient être tenus pour une critique de la physique téléologique du Stagirite, Laks-Most (1993) xxv soulignent justement chez Théophraste « un intérêt patent, et confirmé par tout ce que nous savons de son œuvre, pour la contingence des phénomènes naturels, intérêt qu'il partage sans nul doute avec Aristote, mais auquel il donne aussi une tonalité particulière, parfois pathétique ».

<sup>72</sup> *Met.* 32.11a20–21 avec Laks-Most (1993) xxvi qui parlent de « la centralité [dans l'opuscule sur les principes] du modèle "platonicien" en vertu duquel le premier principe est incapable d'informer la matière » et critiquent très justement les interprétations de l'opuscule comme « proto-stoïcien » (Reale, Van Raalte).

<sup>73</sup> *Met.* 26.9b16 : Χαλεπή δὲ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦθ' ἡ σύνεσις καὶ ἡ πίστις, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἄλλως μέγα καὶ πρὸς τὰς καθ' ἑκάστα πραγματείας ἀναγκαῖον καὶ μάλιστα τὰς μεγίστας, ἐν τίνι ποιητέον τὸν ὅρον, οἷον περὶ τὰς τῆς φύσεως καὶ περὶ τὰς ἔτι προτέρας. οἱ γὰρ ἀπάντων ζητοῦντες λόγον ἀναιροῦσιν λόγον, ἅμα δὲ καὶ τὸ εἰδέναι.

récents<sup>74</sup> supposent qu'il s'agit d'une référence proleptique à ce qui suit, à savoir la question de l'endroit où il faut mettre une limite aux explications, car ils ne voient pas de lien direct avec ce qui précède immédiatement, à savoir l'hypothèse que notre intellect saisit directement les êtres premiers. Or celle-ci s'impose afin d'éviter la régression à l'infini dans la recherche des raisons<sup>75</sup>, qui « détruit la compréhension » ou « la raison » : cette critique de ceux qui ne savent pas où s'arrêter dans leurs explications est formulée en effet juste avant le chapitre 25 (9b4) et répétée dans le chapitre 26 (9b21). Ceci suggère qu'ils sont deux étapes d'un même raisonnement articulé ainsi : notre solution « la plus vraie » à la question de savoir pourquoi nous ne connaissons pas les êtres premiers par leur cause est « difficile », mais indispensable si nous voulons disposer d'un point de départ stable et certain pour comprendre (à partir de la saisie directe des êtres premiers) dans quelle mesure les autres êtres sont ou non explicables.

À l'inverse, en jetant le doute sur notre capacité à saisir les êtres premiers, les Platoniciens ne peuvent plus « placer la limite », ils ne savent plus distinguer entre ce qui mérite et ce qui n'a pas besoin d'être expliqué dans la nature elle-même, comme en témoigne Proclus :

Et, parmi les anciens, certains ont critiqué Platon en disant qu'il n'est pas correct de chercher un principe du principe ou l'origine d'une chose qui est sans origine. Car si nous cherchons une cause de ce qui est premier et concevons une genèse des choses qui existent par elles-mêmes, nous irons sans nous en rendre compte à l'infini et notre spéculation (θεωρίας) n'aura aucune fin. Car, de même que celui qui pense que tout est démontrable détruit avant tout la démonstration même, celui qui cherche la cause de tout met sans dessus-dessous tous les êtres et leur ordre, qui procède d'un certain principe déterminé. Telles sont les critiques de Platon par Théophraste à propos de ce compte-rendu de la genèse de l'âme : il dit que nous ne devons pas chercher le pourquoi de tout ce qui est dans la nature. En effet, dit-il, il est absurde de s'interroger sur la question de savoir pourquoi le feu brûle ou pourquoi la neige refroidit<sup>76</sup>.

Est décrite ici une procédure explicative absurde exactement opposée à celle qu'esquisse Théophraste dans les chapitres 25–26, qui montrent à la fois le lien de dépendance crucial et la distinction épistémologique qui

<sup>74</sup> Laks-Most (1993) 71 n. 47 et Gutas (2010) ad loc.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Aristot. *An. Post.* 1.3.72b15–25 et 2.19.99b20–22 et 100a6–17.

<sup>76</sup> Procl. *In Tim.* 2.120.8–22=159 FHS&G. Voir aussi *Met.* 32.11a18–25, qui critique Speusippe parce qu'il sous-estime la présence du bien dans le monde, faisant preuve d'une ignorance de la nature symétrique des explications infinies de Platon, mais qui pourrait résulter de la même cause, à savoir la transcendance inaccessible du premier principe.

existent entre connaissance directe des principes par l'intellect d'une part, et recherche de l'ordre et de la raison dans les phénomènes naturels d'autre part.

Or Proclus souligne que cette position épistémologique avait une contrepartie cosmologique ou théologique :

Etant données leurs doctrines à tous les deux [*scil.* Platon et Théophraste], il est raisonnable pour Théophraste de dire que l'âme est le principe du mouvement, sans postuler rien d'autre avant elle, et de penser qu'il n'y a pas besoin de chercher un principe du principe. Car il admet lui aussi que le ciel est animé et, pour cette raison, divin<sup>77</sup>.

Théophraste refusait la genèse platonicienne de l'âme (ψυχογονία) et préférait attribuer directement une âme au ciel, du fait que celui-ci est divin et possède donc « l'existence la meilleure », qui ne va pas sans âme : poser des principes inanimés est contraire au meilleur. Or la critique cosmologique de Théophraste atteint également la théologie d'Aristote, quoique avec d'autres arguments : le premier moteur immobile et séparé n'expliquant pas de manière satisfaisante le mouvement du premier ciel et l'ensemble des mouvements du monde<sup>78</sup>, il vaut mieux, comme en témoigne le texte qui vient d'être cité, renoncer au premier moteur immobile et immatériel en posant que les cieux possèdent une âme et se meuvent eux-mêmes.

Il n'existerait donc pas d'intellect séparé, extérieur au monde mais constituant le paradigme et la fin de toutes les activités et mouvements du ciel et de la nature, en particulier de notre contemplation. Théophraste affaiblit ou limite à nouveau l'autonomie et la perfection de l'intellect posées par Aristote<sup>79</sup>. La pensée demeure l'activité la meilleure (*Met.* 9.5b8–10), mais elle relève de l'âme du premier ciel. L'intellect premier n'est plus un acte absolument pur et séparé de tout corps, ce qui pourrait éclairer pourquoi

<sup>77</sup> Procl. *In Tim.* 2.122.10–15= 159 FHS&G : τούτων τοίνυν οὕτω παρ' ἀμφοτέροις δεδογμένων ὁ μὲν Θεόφραστος εἰκότως ἀρχὴν κινήσεως τὴν ψυχὴν εἰπὼν οὐδὲν ἄλλο πρὸ αὐτῆς ὑποθέμενος, ἀρχῆς οὐκ οἶεται δεῖν ἀρχὴν ἐπιζητεῖν· ἐμψυχον γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸς εἶναι δίδωσι τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ διὰ τοῦτο θεῖον. La suite du passage a été citée plus haut, p. 25.

<sup>78</sup> Voir en particulier *Met.* 7–10.5a14–6a15, qui indique les problèmes que pose la doctrine d'Aristot. *Met.* Λ.7–9 présentée auparavant. Voir aussi *Met.* 16.7b9–8a6.

<sup>79</sup> Comme pour l'éthique et la psychologie de l'intellect, il est certes difficile de savoir si Théophraste critique, infléchit ou se contente de discuter (pour mieux l'expliquer) la théologie de son maître. Le problème principal est ici à la fois la nature aporétique et la date de l'opuscule de Théophraste sur les principes. Voir l'état de la question par Gutas (2010) 3–9, 32–43, qui estime avec beaucoup de commentateurs récents qu'il s'agit d'un opuscule de jeunesse. Notons cependant que le rejet du premier moteur par Théophraste est confirmé par d'autres témoignages, en particulier la citation du traité *Du ciel* par Proclus : voir Sharples (2002) 13 et 17.

Théophraste semble moins confiant qu'Aristote dans l'autonomie de l'intellect producteur *en nous* et souligne son « mélange » plutôt que sa pureté. Il est en outre possible que l'abandon du premier moteur immobile et séparé ne soit pas indépendant de la position de Théophraste quant aux limites de l'ordre et de la finalité dans la nature<sup>80</sup>. La psychologie et la cosmologie théophrastéennes de l'intellect feraient système.

## VI. *Les regrets de Théophraste*

Mais peut-on vraiment inclure l'éthique de la contemplation dans ce système afin de retrouver l'interdépendance étroite présente chez Aristote ? Même si l'on admet, sur la base des témoignages précédemment analysés, que Théophraste était plus conscient et inquiet qu'Aristote des conditions imposées et donc des obstacles à la vie contemplative, existe-t-il un lien – plutôt qu'un simple parallèle – entre ce « pessimisme » éthique et des positions psychologiques et surtout cosmologiques mieux établies mais bien abstraites ? Oui, et c'est à nouveau Cicéron qui en témoigne dans les *Tusculanes* :

Théophraste cependant, en mourant, aurait dit-on accusé la nature, parce qu'elle avait donné une longue vie aux cerfs et aux corbeaux, à qui cela n'est d'aucun intérêt, alors qu'aux hommes qui y auraient été intéressés au plus haut point, [elle a donné] une vie si courte. Et s'ils avaient pu vivre plus longtemps, tous les arts étant achevés, la vie des hommes aurait été rendue parfaite par un savoir complet. Donc il se plaignait de s'éteindre au moment où il commençait à apercevoir celui-ci<sup>81</sup>.

La brièveté de la vie humaine ralentit les progrès intellectuels et techniques de l'humanité, et aurait empêché Théophraste lui-même de rechercher ou de comprendre certaines choses qu'il désirait et pensait pouvoir saisir<sup>82</sup>.

<sup>80</sup> Voir peut-être *Met.* 15.7a19–7b8, où sont évoquées les limites de l'ordre et de la finalité : Théophraste évoque la possibilité que l'ordre dans la nature soit produit par l'ordre et les mouvements du ciel, à la manière dont le soleil produit les saisons et donc la genèse des animaux et des plantes. Dans cette explication, les activités de la nature ne sont plus rationalisées et finalisées *a priori* comme des « imitations » ou « désirs » du premier principe immobile. Cf. *Met.* 10.5b26–6a5 et 16.7b23–8a1 où ce modèle aristotélicien de l'imitation est critiqué.

<sup>81</sup> Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* 3.69= 34A FHS&G : « Theophrastus autem moriens accusasse naturam dicitur, quod cervis et cornicibus vitam diuturnam, quorum id nihil interesset, hominibus, quorum maxime interfuisset, tam exiguum vitam dedisset: quorum si aetas potuisset esse longinquior, futurum fuisse ut omnibus perfectis artibus omni doctrina hominum vita erudiretur. Querebatur igitur se tum, cum illa videre coepisset, exstingui ».

<sup>82</sup> On pourrait comprendre que *illa* se réfère à *vita*, donc à la situation d'omniscience

Dans la contemplation autant que dans l'action, le temps manque et nous mourrons au milieu de nos projets. Or, la durée de notre vie n'est pas seulement un problème éthique ou pratique<sup>83</sup>; elle est érigée en problème cosmologique dans l'opuscule sur les principes lui-même :

[...] voici qui du moins manifeste clairement que beaucoup de choses n'obéissent pas au bien ni ne l'accueillent ou plutôt leur grande majorité : car l'animé est en petit nombre, tandis que l'inanimé est illimité ; et brève est l'existence des êtres animés eux-mêmes, même si elle est meilleure<sup>84</sup>.

La nature ne fournit pas les conditions nécessaires et suffisantes à la réalisation de la « meilleure vie », non pas seulement du fait des aléas de la fortune, auxquels la vertu peut en partie résister, mais surtout à cause de certaines imperfections de la nature humaine elle-même par rapport à l'ordre du monde, comme si la nature nous mettait des bâtons dans les roues après nous avoir elle-même placés sur le chemin de sa contemplation.

Ce second témoignage des *Tusculanes* me semble donc fiable et intéressant, non parce qu'il enregistrerait les véritables dernières paroles de Théophraste<sup>85</sup>, mais parce qu'il contient plusieurs thèses confirmées par d'autres

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heureuse de l'humanité, que Théophraste percevrait comme imminente et aurait aimé connaître. Certains textes aristotéliens suggèrent en effet l'idée que de nombreux arts sont arrivés ou vont arriver à leur perfection, comme le note Zhmud (2006) 210 n. 211 et comme Cicéron le note juste avant de citer Théophraste (*Tusc. Disp.* 3.69). Théophraste semble au contraire regretter que les conditions ne soient pas réunies pour le perfectionnement de tous les arts. En outre, si Théophraste sentait cette situation approcher (comme Aristote), son regret ne concernerait que lui-même et serait dérisoire. Enfin, Théophraste est un philosophe, qui n'est pas seulement témoin ou bénéficiaire des progrès des connaissances humaines, mais y contribue activement. Pour toutes ces raisons, il me semble que *illa* renvoie à *doctrina*, à savoir aux connaissances acquises par Théophraste et l'humanité à son époque, qui font entrevoir un achèvement possible, que la brièveté de la vie humaine empêche de réaliser.

<sup>83</sup> Sur la brièveté de la vie humaine, voir Šiwān al-ḥikma, *cap. de Theophrasto, dictum* n° 21= 478 FHS&G et Diog. Laert. 5.40–41 cité n. 85, avec Fortenbaugh (1984) 236–240.

<sup>84</sup> *Met.* 32.11a14–18 (trad. Laks-Most).

<sup>85</sup> Diog. Laert. 5.40–41 consigne des dernières paroles différentes : « On dit qu'à ses élèves, qui lui demandaient s'il avait une recommandation à faire, il dit n'avoir rien à recommander, si ce n'est que nombreux sont les plaisirs liés à la gloire que la vie exagère. "Nous autres, en effet, au moment où nous commençons de vivre, nous mourrons. Il n'y a donc rien de moins profitable que l'amour de la gloire. Mais bonne chance à vous : ou bien renoncez à cette doctrine (ῥῆτοι τὸν λόγον ἄφετε), car la peine y est abondante, ou défendez-la noblement, car la gloire y est grande. Il y a plus de vanité que de profit dans la vie. Mais il ne m'est plus permis de délibérer sur comment agir. C'est à vous d'examiner ce qu'il faut faire ». On retrouve le thème de la brièveté de la vie et de la peine irréductible, et même l'idée centrale du témoignage de Cicéron si l'on comprend λόγος comme désignant la raison en général et la philosophie. Sur ces deux témoignages, voir Fortenbaugh (2011) 64–66.



témoignages, liées ici entre elles de manière singulière. Il reflète donc probablement l'esprit de l'analyse théophrastéenne de la vie contemplative. Il montre en particulier que le problème des limites de notre connaissance relève bien en un sens de la cosmologie (ou de la théologie), dans la mesure où la nature nous assigne une fin et une bonne partie des moyens pour l'atteindre, mais s'arrête en chemin en ne nous permettant pas de réussir parfaitement.

On a bien ici une faiblesse propre à la condition humaine, qui va plus loin que ce que l'on trouve chez Aristote, puisqu'il ne s'agit pas seulement de dire que notre activité intellectuelle est épisodique et faillible (par rapport à celle d'intellects séparés). Il ne s'agit pas non plus d'invoquer la faiblesse de notre esprit à la manière platonicienne : encore une fois, ce n'est pas l'hétérogénéité ontologique entre notre condition présente (liée au corps) et la pureté des objets de l'intellect qui fait obstacle à notre vie contemplative, mais l'absence des conditions *optimales* requises pour exercer cette activité naturelle à notre âme. Notre activité théorique demeure toujours « mêlée de peines », amoindrie par le regret de ne pouvoir atteindre certains résultats entrevus, à cause du manque de loisir, du manque d'endurance et d'acuité intellectuelles ou simplement du manque de temps, mais aussi du fait de l'opacité irréductible du réel.



ΑΠΛΑΝΗΣ ΘΕΩΡΙΑ.  
EINIGE ASPEKTE DER EPIKUREISCHEN VORSTELLUNG  
VOM ΒΙΟΣ ΘΕΩΡΗΤΙΚΟΣ

Michael Erler

I. *Einleitung*

In einem Brief an den Epikureer Atticus<sup>1</sup> erwähnt Cicero einen Disput zwischen Dikaiarch und Theophrast über die Frage, ob ein aktives – und das meint politisch engagiertes – oder eher ein kontemplatives Leben vorzuziehen sei. Dieser Streit greift ein Problem auf, das schon vor Platon diskutiert wurde – erinnert sei an Euripides' Tragödie *Antiope* –, das in Platons Dialogen mit der Frage πῶς βιωτέον geradezu zu einem Leitmotiv wurde und das Aristoteles insofern verschärfte, als er dem βίος θεωρητικός besonderen Vorrang vor der *vita activa* einräumte und damit zu Auseinandersetzungen innerhalb seiner eigenen Schule beitrug, wie der Disput zwischen Dikaiarch und Theophrast belegt<sup>2</sup>. Eine derartige Auseinandersetzung über den Vorrang von kontemplativen und praktischen Leben ist kennzeichnend für das intellektuelle Klima, in dem Epikur lebte, philosophierte und schrieb<sup>3</sup>. Denn die hellenistischen Philosophen verstanden sich zunehmend als Vertreter eines dogmatischen Systems. Gesicherte Kenntnisse vom Aufbau der Welt und der Rolle des Menschen in ihr sollten dazu befähigen, in Übereinstimmung mit der Naturordnung ein angemessenes, erfülltes und deshalb glückliches Leben zu führen<sup>4</sup>: Philosophie wurde zu einer Fachwissenschaft, die sich in Konkurrenz mit anderen Fachwissenschaften bewähren musste, die ihren Vorrang allein aus der Bedeutung ihres Ziels – der glücklichen Bewältigung des Lebens – herleitete<sup>5</sup>. Unter diesen neuen Voraussetzungen

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<sup>1</sup> Cic. *Ad Att.* 2.16.3= Theophr. frg. 481 FHS&G= Dicaearchus frg. 33 Mirhady. Vgl. die Kapitel bei Bénatouïl und Lévy, 18–19 und 67–68.

<sup>2</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Gorg.* 484e2ff.= Eur. *Ant.* (frg. 183 Nauck); mit Dodds (1959) 273 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Vgl. Festugière (1936/1950<sup>2</sup>); Snell (1955<sup>3</sup>) 401–411; Redlow (1966); Gigon (1987); Kullmann (1995) 253–276.

<sup>4</sup> Vgl. Epict. *Diss.* 1.6.19–20.

<sup>5</sup> Vgl. Dihle (1986) 185–231.

ist zu erwarten, dass das Verhältnis von Theorie und Praxis und die Frage, was unter Praxis zu verstehen ist, intensiv diskutiert und dass neue Akzente gesetzt wurden. Dies ist gerade im Epikureismus der Fall. Denn Epikurs Philosophie verstand sich nicht nur als Kunst, den Menschen ein glückliches Leben wie das eines Gottes auf Erden zu ermöglichen, sondern propagierte Lust als das den Menschen von der Natur vorgegebene Ziel allen Strebens<sup>6</sup>. Sie setzte sich damit dem Verdacht aus, unter den traditionellen Lebensformen diejenige des Genusses – also den βίος ἀπολαυστικός – zu propagieren, jene Lebensform, die von Aristoteles als Sache eines ‚grobschlächtigen‘ Menschen und als ‚animalisches Dasein‘ disqualifiziert worden war<sup>7</sup>, und die als eines rationalen Menschen unwürdig galt. Sogar aus der eigenen Schule wurde Epikur mit entsprechenden Vorwürfen konfrontiert, die eine lange Tradition von Polemik begründet, die bis heute anhält und auf einer Fehlinterpretation des epikureischen Lustbegriffes beruht, der auf ‚nüchterner Überlegung‘ beruht<sup>8</sup>. Epikur musste deshalb daran gelegen sein, die Rationalität und damit den kontemplativen Aspekt der von ihm propagierten Lebensform zu unterstreichen. Es war in seinem Interesse zu erklären, ob und gegebenenfalls welche Rolle er der *vita activa* zuzubilligen bereit war, obgleich er politisches Engagement ablehnte und die Stürme des Lebens nach Lukrez lieber vom sicheren Strand aus beobachten wollte, und welche Bedeutung für ihn der βίος ἀπολαυστικός hatte<sup>9</sup>. Epikurs Ideal der Unruhefreiheit – der Ataraxie – und der Abstinenz von politischem Engagement, haben manche Interpreten zur Vermutung geführt, dieses Ideal mit dem kontemplativen Leben gleichzusetzen<sup>10</sup>. Gleichwohl ist eine Philosophie, die Worte als leer erachtet, wenn sie nicht Affekte beseitigt und sich als *philosophia medicans* betrachtet, ohne Zweifel praktisch ausgerichtet<sup>11</sup>. Jedenfalls ist festzuhalten, dass Epikurs Position offenbar komplexer ist als oft behauptet und sich nicht ohne Weiteres in ein plakatives und ohnehin künstliches Kategorienschema von βίος θεωρητικός, πολιτικός, ἀπολαυστικός einordnen lässt.

<sup>6</sup> Vgl. Ep. *Ep. Men.* 135; zur Ethik vgl. Erler (1999) 642–674.

<sup>7</sup> Vgl. Aristot. *Eth. Nic.* 1095b17 ff. Zu Aristoteles vgl. Kullmann (1995).

<sup>8</sup> Vgl. Ep. *Ep. Men.* 132 mit Erler (2010) 99–110; zur Polemik Sedley (1976), 119–159; zur Bewertung der praktischen Klugheit gegenüber spekulativer Metaphysik vgl. Bignone (1973<sup>2</sup>), Bd. 1, 117 ff.; doch vgl. Diano (1946) 113. Zu φρόνησις bei Platon vgl. zuletzt Lavecchia (2006) 44 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Vgl. Lucr. 2.1 ff. Zu Epikurs These ‚Lebe im Verborgenen‘ vgl. Roskam (2007).

<sup>10</sup> Vgl. Grilli (1953); Koller (1958).

<sup>11</sup> Vgl. frg. 221 Usener; dazu Gigante (1975) 53–61; Philodem scheint die Theoria etwas aufwerten zu wollen: Gigante (1972) 59–65, bes. 62.

Freilich ist es nicht ganz leicht, sich ein Bild von Epikurs Position zu machen. Denn das Werk Epikurs, von dem man wohl am ehesten eine Antwort erwarten dürfte, die vier Bücher *De vitis*, ist verloren. Wir erfahren nur, dass Epikur einen kynischen Lebensstil ablehnte, Zurückhaltung gegenüber politischem Engagement empfahl und sich wohl auch kritisch mit Aristoteles auseinandersetzte<sup>12</sup>.

Doch erweisen sich andere, erhaltene Werke als hilfreich. Das gilt besonders für den *Menoikeusbrief*, der als Protrepikos Epikurs eigene Vorstellungen von einem guten Leben formuliert, Vorgaben macht, wie man nach seiner Ansicht ein Leben als Gott auf Erden führen kann<sup>13</sup> und die eigene Position von anderen Lebensmodellen abgrenzt. Diese aufschlussreiche Abgrenzung geschieht auf verschiedene, bisweilen durchaus gelehrte Weise, mit der sich Epikur, der sich so kritisch gegenüber traditioneller παιδεία äußert, als ein *doctus philosophus* erweist, der mit literarischen und philosophischen Vorlagen zu spielen versteht.

Ein Beispiel hierfür soll uns im Folgenden besonders interessieren. Epikur möchte nämlich im *Menoikeusbrief* offenbar eine wichtige Partie aus Platons *Timaios* in Erinnerung rufen, die Epikurs Aussage über die intendierte Lebensform Profil gibt. Denn Epikur lässt Differenzen, aber auch Konvergenzen zu Platons Auffassung von θεωρία und Praxis als Lebensformen im *Menoikeusbrief* auf diese Weise deutlich werden. Ich möchte Epikurs Hinweis folgen und vorschlagen, bei seinen Bewertungen von θεωρία und Praxis den platonischen Hintergrund im Blick zu behalten und auf diese Weise versuchen, seiner differenzierten Antwort auf die Frage nach der richtigen Lebensform gerecht zu werden.

## II. Epikurs Brief an Menoikeus

Denn nicht Trinkgelage und ununterbrochenes Schwärmen und nicht Genuss von Knaben und Frauen und von Fischen und allem anderen, was ein reichbesetzter Tisch bietet, erzeugt das lustvolle Leben, sondern die nüchterne Überlegung (νήφων λογισμός), die die Ursachen für alles Wählen und Meiden erforscht und die leeren Meinungen austreibt, aus denen die schlimmste Verwirrung der Seele entsteht<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Diog Laert. 10.119; zu *De vitis* vgl. Erler (1994) 86–87.

<sup>13</sup> Ep. *Ep. Men.* 135. Zum protreptischen Charakter des Briefes vgl. Bignone (1973<sup>2</sup>) Bd. 1, 67ff.

<sup>14</sup> Ep. *Ep. Men.* 135; Gigon (1983<sup>3</sup>) 105.

Der *Menoikeusbrief* Epikurs, aus dem das Zitat stammt, ist ein Protrepikos für seine Philosophie. In ihm formulierte Epikur seine Vorstellung von einem erfüllten Leben (τέλος) und erläutert die Vorgaben, die hierfür notwendig sind. Es geht um eine Lebensform, die es jedem ermöglicht, ein Leben „wie ein Gott unter den Menschen zu führen“, wie der Brief schließt<sup>15</sup>. Grundlage dieser Selbstvergöttlichung ist für Epikur die Vernunft. Mit diesem wiederholten Hinweis versucht Epikur offensichtlich die Vorwürfe abzuwehren, er propagiere ein Leben bloßer Triebbefriedigung (βίος ἀπολαυστικός). Der *Menoikeusbrief* hat also einen durchaus apologetisch-polemischen Charakter, den Epikur bisweilen freilich geschickt versteckt.

Wenn sich Epikur zu Beginn des Briefes dezidiert an Leser aller Altersstufen wendet und sie zur Philosophie auffordert, dann bezieht er Position in der vieldiskutierten Frage, wann und wie lange man Philosophie betreiben soll und wendet sich gegen Ansichten wie die Platons, der wahre Philosophie erst ab 50 erlaubt, oder diejenige eines Kallikles oder Isokrates, nach der man die Philosophie nur in der Jugend, „bevor die jungen Leute dann etwas Vernünftiges tun“, lernen soll<sup>16</sup>.

Auch Epikurs im *Menoikeusbrief* geäußerte These, dass praktische Vernunft (φρόνησις) wertvoller als Philosophie sei, wird erst eigentlich verständlich, wenn man sie als gegen Platon und Aristoteles und ihre Gleichsetzung von Philosophie mit Metaphysik und Ontologie gerichtet und als Plädoyer für eine praktische, als *philosophia medicans* verstandene Lebensphilosophie versteht, die den Menschen von Furcht vor Tod, Gott und Irritationen im Leben befreien und zu innerweltlichem Glück verhelfen soll<sup>17</sup>.

Schließlich kann und soll die oben zitierte Aussage Epikurs, dass alle Menschen zwar nach Lust streben, dies aber mit Hilfe ‚nüchterner‘ Überlegung (λογισμός), auf die rationale Grundlage des von Epikur angeblich propagierten βίος ἀπολαυστικός verweisen und eine Missdeutung seiner Lehre abweisen, derer sich Epikur schon zu Lebzeiten im eigenen Kreis und in der öffentlichen Wahrnehmung – etwa auf der Komödienbühne – erwehren musste. Epikur predigt vielmehr eine Askese im Sinne des Maßhaltens und der praktisch abwägenden Vernunft<sup>18</sup>. Nüchterne Überlegung als Grundlage epikureischer Lebensform<sup>19</sup>; mit diesem Ausdruck erweist sich Epikur

<sup>15</sup> Ep. *Ep. Men.* 135; zur epikureischem Angleichung an Gott vgl. Erler (2002).

<sup>16</sup> Vgl. Erler (2000).

<sup>17</sup> Vgl. Ep. *Ep. Men.* 132.

<sup>18</sup> Vgl. Ep. *KD* 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ep. *Ep. Men.* 132, dazu vgl. Erler (2010).

als *doctus philosophus*. Denn der prägnante Ausdruck ‚nüchterne Überlegung‘ (νήφων λογισμός) findet sich vor Epikur nicht, ist offenbar von ihm geprägt und spielt gleichzeitig auf eine Kontroverse im Bereich der zeitgenössischen Dichtung und Dichtungstheorie und die Frage an, ob Dichtung im Zustand der Begeisterung (ἐνθουσιασμός) oder aufgrund rationaler Technizität entsteht. Traditionell werden dabei die Rationalisten mit Wassertrinkern, die Enthusiasten mit Weintrinkern gleichgesetzt. Mit dem Ausdruck ‚nüchterne Überlegung‘ positioniert sich Epikur also unter den Wassertrinkern und wehrt auf diese Weise durchaus witzig die Unterstellung ab, er vertrete das Ideal des βίος ἀπολαυστικός im Sinne des Aristoteles als bloße Bedürfnisbefriedigung<sup>20</sup>. Epikurs Argumentation unterstreicht also auf gelehrte Weise den rationalen – und damit erlernbaren – Gehalt einer Lehre, die letztlich zur Lebensform eines Gottes im Diesseits befähigen soll.

### III. ἀπλανής θεωρία und Platons Timaios

Auch an einer weiteren Stelle unterstreicht Epikur den rationalen Charakter der von ihm gepriesenen Lebensform auf eine Weise, die gelehrt ist und – wie mir scheint – größere Aufmerksamkeit verdient, zumal sie aufschlussreich für die gesamte Argumentation des *Menoikeusbriefes* ist. In seinem Bemühen, die von ihm vorgeschlagene Lebensform als richtigen Weg zum Glück aufzuzeigen und rational ins rechte Licht zu rücken, spricht Epikur in einer Stelle „von einer ‚unbeirrten Betrachtung‘ – einer ἀπλανής θεωρία – der Begierden, die jedes Wählen und Meiden auf die Gesundheit des Körpers und die Ruhe der Seele zurückzuführen [vermag]. Denn das ist das Ziel und Inhalt des glückseligen Lebens“<sup>21</sup>.

Nicht umherirrende Schau – ἀπλανής θεωρία also als Grundlage für die richtige Wahl und das Glück des Lebens: Wie die der Philosophie überlegenen ‚φρόνησις‘ oder der ‚nüchterne Verstand‘ (νήφων λογισμός) soll auch der Ausdruck ‚nicht umherirrende Schau‘ (ἀπλανής θεωρία) die praktische Vernunft als notwendige Voraussetzung für ein glückliches Leben wie ein Gott auf Erden erweisen. Freilich stellt sich die Frage, was mit dem Ausdruck ‚nicht umherirrende θεωρία‘ eigentlich gemeint ist. Vor allem das Adjektiv ἀπλανής ist im Zusammenhang mit θεωρία nicht einfach zu verstehen.

<sup>20</sup> Vgl. Aristot. *Eth. Nic.* 1095b17–29; vgl. Gastaldi (2003).

<sup>21</sup> Vgl. Ep. *Ep. Men.* 128.

Zunächst ist festzuhalten, dass sich auch der Ausdruck ἀπλανής θεωρία bei Epikur nur an dieser Stelle und vor Epikur überhaupt nicht findet. Das Wort ἀπλανής freilich ist vor Epikur durchaus und zumeist in astronomischem Kontext zu finden und bezeichnet dort die fixen Sterne im Vergleich mit den umherirrenden Sternen, den Planeten (vgl. Plat. *Polit.* 288a; *Tim.* 34a, 40b). In anderem Kontext begegnet uns das Wort, wenn Platon es auf den menschlichen Körper überträgt und fordert, dass man nicht im Rausch Kinder zeugen soll<sup>22</sup>.

An einer durchaus prominenten Stelle in Platons Dialog *Timaios* jedoch finden wir das Wort ἀπλανής in einem Kontext, der für das Verständnis unserer Stelle bei Epikur aufschlussreich ist und auf den Epikur hinweisen möchte. Wie im *Menoikeusbrief* geht es an dieser Stelle um eine Form des Denkens und die rationale Grundlage einer Lebensform, die nach Platons Ansicht zu einem Leben der Menschen als Gott führen kann.

Wenden wir uns also kurz dem *Timaios* zu, der für Platon in vielen Fragen der Physiologie und Philosophie von so großer Bedeutung war. Für uns ist jene Partie von Interesse, die im *Timaios* das Scharnier zwischen den Ausführungen über die Werke der Vernunft und die Werke der Notwendigkeit darstellt. Es handelt sich um jene Stelle im *Timaios*, an der Platon die Bedeutung des Sehsinns (ὄψις) für die Menschen und ihre Lebensweise hervorhebt, und wo er ihn als Gottesgeschenk preist<sup>23</sup>. Die Stelle steht zudem in engem Zusammenhang mit Platons Ausführungen gegen Ende des Dialoges über die Möglichkeiten des Menschen, sich selbst Gott anzugleichen<sup>24</sup>. Mit Blick auf die anderen Stellen im *Menoikeusbrief*, an denen Epikur literarische und philosophische Traditionen evoziert und transformiert, liegt die Vermutung nahe, dass Epikur mit seinen Bemerkungen über ἀπλανής θεωρία im *Menoikeusbrief* ebenfalls auf eine Vorlage anspielt und diesmal den *Timaios* im Blick hat.

Zunächst also ein Blick auf die Stelle im *Timaios*, an der ἀπλανής als Qualifikation der Erkenntnis eine Rolle spielt. Im Kontext seiner Erörterungen über den Körper des Menschen und seiner Diskussion von Ursachen und Mitursachen, kommt Platon auch auf den Seh Sinn zu sprechen (ὄψις) und preist dessen Vorzüge (das Sehen hat demnach den Menschen große Vorteile gebracht), denn von ihm stamme die Philosophie ab: „Nun aber haben Tag und Nacht dadurch, dass wir sie erblicken [...] die Zahl erzeugt und die

<sup>22</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Resp.* 288a; *Tim.* 34a, 40b; *Leg.* 775c.

<sup>23</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Tim.* 46e–47b.

<sup>24</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Tim.* 90c ff.



Vorstellung der Zeit sowie die Untersuchung über die Natur des Alls uns gewährt. Und hieraus haben wir uns die Gattung der Philosophie verschafft, die das größte Gut ist, das je als Geschenk der Götter zu dem sterblichen Geschlecht kam oder kommen wird“<sup>25</sup>.

Ohne Sterne und Himmel zu sehen hätte der Mensch demnach also weder Zahl und Zeit noch die Untersuchung der Natur kennengelernt. Doch geht es nicht nur um bloße Betrachtung, sondern um einen praktischen Zweck. Gott hat den Menschen das Sehen gegeben, damit wir die Umläufe der Vernunft am Himmel nicht nur erkennen, sondern sie für die Regulierung der Umschwünge des eigenen Denkens nutzbar machen. Denn die Umschwünge des menschlichen Denkens seien mit den Umläufen des Geistes im Himmel zwar verwandt (συγγενείς); doch seien die Umschwünge des menschlichen Denkens gegenüber den göttlichen Umschwüngen defizitär. Die menschlichen Umschwünge seien nämlich ungeregt (ἀτάρακτοι), die göttlichen hingegen geregelt (τεταγμένοι). Es muss also darum gehen – so heißt es weiter –, dass die Umläufe des menschlichen Denkens, die sich in umherirrendem Zustand befänden (πεπλανημένοι), die Umschwünge der Vernunftbahnen der Götter, die von Abschweifungen frei seien – ἀπλανείς –, nachahmen (μιμούμενοι τὰς τοῦ θεοῦ πάντως ἀπλανεῖς οὔσας) und wir dadurch eingerichtet werden<sup>26</sup>. Der Seh Sinn wird damit zum Ursprung der Philosophie und zur Möglichkeit, unser eigenes ‚umherirrendes‘ Denken den steten Umläufen (πλάναις) bei den Göttern angleichen zu können. Später im *Timaios* erfahren wir, dass darin in der Tat die Chance der menschlichen Seele zu sehen ist, sich und ihr Denken „in Ordnung“ zu bringen, weil unsere Seele „ein himmlisches Gewächs, d.h. mit dem göttlichen Bereich verwandt ist“. Deshalb kann und muss man „den Gedanken und Umläufen des Alls“, die dem Göttlichen in uns verwandt sind, folgen „und die bei unserem Entstehen in unserem Kopf verdorbenen Umläufe dadurch wieder in Ordnung bringen, dass man Harmonie und Umläufe des Alls erkennt“. Auf diese Weise kann es bei der menschlichen Seele – so Platon gegen Ende des *Timaios* – zu einer Angleichung an Gott und Selbstvergöttlichung kommen<sup>27</sup>.

Göttliche Umläufe des Denkens (διανόησις) zeichnen sich also durch Regelmäßigkeit (ἀτάρακτος) und Stetigkeit (ἀπλανής) aus, wohingegen menschliches Denken von Unstetigkeit (τεταραγμένος) und Umherirren

<sup>25</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Tim.* 47b; Schleiermacher (1855<sup>3</sup>).

<sup>26</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Tim.* 47b–c.

<sup>27</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Tim.* 90a–c mit Sedley (1997).

(πλάνη) gekennzeichnet ist. Menschliches Denken irrt umher wie manche Sterne<sup>28</sup>. Dieses Defizit menschlicher Erkenntnis ist freilich infolge der Verwandtschaft der menschlichen Seele mit dem Göttlichen durch Angleichung heilbar.

Zwar ist Unstetigkeit (πλάνη) ein Merkmal irdisch orientierten Denkens. Menschliche Meinung hat deshalb nach Platon die Neigung fortzulaufen und muss festgebunden werden, wenn es zu wirklichem Wissen werden soll. In diesem Zusammenhang muss menschliche ὄψις am Anfang der ‚Untersuchung über das All‘, der Philosophie und jener Selbstvergöttlichung des Menschen stehen, die durch Beseitigung des Umherirrens (πλάνη) menschlichen Denkens und Annäherung an die Stetigkeit göttlichen Seins gelingen kann. Die physikalische Welt erweist sich dann als Voraussetzung für die Menschen, jene göttlichen Objekte zu erkennen, nach denen sie streben. Astronomie wird zur Brücke zwischen der sensiblen und intelligiblen Welt<sup>29</sup>. Platon beschreibt den unsteten geistigen Zustand innerweltlichen Denkens, der überwunden werden soll, mit verschiedenen Bildern wie z. B. demjenigen der entlaufenden Daidalosbilder<sup>30</sup>. Von πλάνη und ἀπλανής des menschlichen Erkennens, bzw. göttlichen Geistes jedoch spricht Platon nur hier an der Timaiosstelle.

#### IV. Epikureische Theoria im Kontext

Kehren wir nun zu Epikur zurück und vergleichen wir seine Aussage mit derjenigen Platons, dann fällt auf: Anders als Platon charakterisiert Epikur die menschliche Erkenntnisweise als ἀπλανής, wohingegen Platon diese Eigenschaft dem göttlichen Bereich zubilligt; zudem spricht Epikur in einem Zusammenhang der Analyse diesseitiger Phänomene wie Affekte und Begierden von θεωρία, während Platon θεωρία mit dem Bereich des göttlichen Seins in Verbindung bringt. Erinnern wir kurz an den Gebrauch von θεωρία bei Platon und Epikur:

Bei Platon bezeichnet θεωρία bisweilen die Teilnahme am Festspiel und der religiösen Veranstaltung<sup>31</sup>. Damit greift er jene traditionelle Bedeutung von θεωρία auf, welche die Betrachtung religiöser Ereignisse und die Pflicht

<sup>28</sup> Vgl. Nightingale (2004) 173, 256.

<sup>29</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Tim.* 69a; Zur Astronomie als Brücke zwischen sensibler und intelligibler Welt vgl. Sedley (1989) 359–383, hier 377.

<sup>30</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Men.* 97e–98a; vgl. Erler (1987) 83 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Phaed.* 58b; *Resp.* 556c; *Leg.* 650a.

bezeichnet, von dem Beobachteten zu berichten. Aus diesem religiösen Kontext heraus, wird das Wort zur Bezeichnung eines empirischen Wissenserwerbes zum Merkmal des Weisen und zum Kennzeichen einer Lebensform, die sich um diesseitigen Wissenserwerb bemüht<sup>32</sup>. Von hier übernahm Platon den Begriff θεωρία und transformierte und integrierte ihn in den Kontext seiner Philosophie. Denn θεωρία wird in Platons Philosophie zu jener Schau des intelligiblen Bereiches, in dem es keine Unstetigkeit, sondern Stetigkeit gibt, wo die πλάνη beendet wird durch die Schau der Ideen wie es im *Phaidon* heißt<sup>33</sup>. Der Mensch kommt demnach nur zur Ruhe, wenn man das Diesseits verlässt und zur Schau (θεωρία) der Ideen gelangt. Sowohl ἀπλάνης, wie auch θεωρία sind bei Platon Ausdrücke, die mit dem Bereich wirklichen Wissens in der intelligiblen, nicht der empirischen Welt verbunden sind.

Auch Epikur ist die ursprüngliche Bedeutung von θεωρία im Sinne eines ‚Beiwohnens bei religiösen Praktiken‘ durchaus bekannt, und er spricht sogar von einer mit dieser θεωρία verbundenen besonderen Lust<sup>34</sup>. Epikur übernimmt θεωρία in sein philosophisches System zur Untersuchung der natürlichen Ursachen der empirischen Dinge. In epikureischer θεωρία geht es um Naturabläufe und die *maiestas cognita rerum*, von der Lukrez spricht<sup>35</sup>. Grundlage epikureischer θεωρία ist die unmittelbare sinnliche Wahrnehmung der Wirklichkeit. Wenn es um Gegenstände geht, die sich direkter Wahrnehmung entziehen, wie z. B. die Atome oder das Leere, dann qualifiziert Epikur θεωρεῖν mit dem Ausdruck διὰ λόγου, was von Lukrez mit *mente tueri* übersetzt wird<sup>36</sup>. Es geht dabei um ein analogisches Denken, das die Schlussfolgerung von empirischen Daten auf Dinge erlaubt, die unmittelbarer Empirie nicht zugänglich sind. Eine θεωρία, die auf sinnlicher Wahrnehmung beruht, bietet nach Epikur eine sichere und irrumsfreie Erkenntnis, kann deshalb zur Ataraxie des Menschen beitragen und ist Grundlage der von Epikur propagierten philosophischen Lebensform. Ein ‚Betrachter‘ – ἀποθεωρήτης, wie es bei Philodem mit singulärem Ausdruck heißt – kann als glücklich und erfolgreich (εὐτυχής) bezeichnet werden. Voraussetzung ist, dass die Ergebnisse der θεωρία nicht durch falsche

<sup>32</sup> Vgl. Solon bei Herodot. 1.30; Plat. *Leg.* 952d; Hekat. *FGrHist.* 1.1.12a; Montiglio (2000); Nightingale (2004) 64.

<sup>33</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Phaed.* 79b, 81d–e; vgl. Nightingale (2004) 101, 107 ff.

<sup>34</sup> Vgl. POxy. 215, dazu Obbink (1984) 607–619, bes. 617; Epikur spricht sogar von einer mit dieser θεωρία verbundenen besonderen Lust (Diog. Laert. 10.120; Plut. *Non posse suav. vivi* 1095C).

<sup>35</sup> Vgl. Ep. *Ep. Herodot.* 35; Ep. *Pyth.* 86.116; Lucr. 5.7 ff.; διὰ λόγου θεωρεῖν Ep. *Ep. Herodot.* 47, 59. 62; vgl. Sedley (1973) 26 f.

<sup>36</sup> Vgl. Lucr. 5.1198–1203.

Schlussfolgerungen entstellt werden<sup>37</sup>. Diese ‚theoretische‘ Lebensform stellen die Epikureer einer anderen entgegen, die ganz von politischem Ehrgeiz getrieben und deshalb nach Ansicht der Epikureer frei von theoretischer und praktischer Weisheit ist<sup>38</sup>.

Liest man also die Stelle im *Menoikeusbrief* vor dem Hintergrund der Timaiosstelle und mit Blick auf Platons Vorstellung von θεωρία, dann gewinnt der Ausdruck ἀπλανής θεωρία an Profil und wird auch für Epikurs Vorstellung von einer philosophischen Lebensform aussagekräftig. Epikur greift offenbar auf die traditionelle Auffassung von θεωρία als einem empirischen Erkenntnisstreben zurück, wie wir es z. B. bei Herodot finden; er macht also jene Transformation gleichsam rückgängig, die Platon am Begriff vorgenommen hat. Gleichzeitig aber ist zu konstatieren, dass Epikur für diese θεωρία jene Stetigkeit reklamiert, die Platon für menschlich empirische Erkenntnis gerade bestreitet. Diese diesseitsorientierte θεωρία soll und kann nach Epikur genau das bieten, was Platon von seiner jenseitsorientierten Theorie erwartet: Die Fähigkeit des Menschen, sich selbst Glück und ein Leben wie das eines Gottes zu beschaffen. Wie der *Menoikeusbrief* und der *Timaios* zeigen, wollen ja sowohl Platon als auch Epikur eine theoretische Lebensform zum Zweck der Selbstvergöttlichung ermöglichen; dies freilich mit einem fundamentalen Unterschied: Wo Platon durch Jenseitsorientierung und die Pflege der göttlichen Gebote der unsterblichen Seele des Menschen ein Leben ‚als‘ Gott auf Erden (soweit dies einem Menschen möglich ist) verspricht, kann Epikur nur – wie es im *Menoikeusbrief* heißt – ein Leben ‚wie ein Gott‘ auf Erden (ὡς θεός) versprechen<sup>39</sup>. Denn in der Tat richtet sich seine Theorie nur auf die vergängliche Wirklichkeit und auf einen Menschen, dessen Seele sterblich ist. Voraussetzung ist bei beiden ein Leben, das die θεωρία mit freilich unterschiedlicher Zielrichtung zur Grundlage hat. Selbst für dieses ‚antiplatonische‘ Modell kann sich Epikur auf den *Timaios* berufen und zwar genau auf die Stelle, an welcher Platon auf den Aspekt der Angleichung der ‚unordentlichen‘ und ‚unsteten‘ menschlichen Seele an die geistige Welt der Stetigkeit aufgreift und von der Möglichkeit einer Selbstvergöttlichung spricht. Denn dort spricht Platon nicht nur davon, dass eine Pflege der unsterblichen

<sup>37</sup> Vgl. Gigante (1972) 62. Zu ἀποθεωρήτης vgl. Philod. *De conversatione* col. 7.2 (Amoroso [1975] 63–76, 66); Lucr. 5.1198–1203.

<sup>38</sup> Vgl. Lucr. 3.56 ff.; Philod. *De Oeconomia* (= *De Vitiis* 9) col. 22.17 ff. col. 23.34 (Jensen [1907]).

<sup>39</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Resp.* 500b–d; Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 4.155.1–4= 130.2 (Ep. *Ep. Men.* 135), vgl. dazu Dörrie-Baltes (1998) 307 ff.

Seele notwendig ist, um göttlich zu werden, sondern erwägt zumindest ein Alternativmodell, in dem er freilich keine wirkliche Alternative sieht. An jener Stelle nämlich, an der er über Angleichung an Gott, Ordnung und Erkenntnis (Plat. *Tim.* 90c) spricht, deutet Platon an, dass manche Menschen sich möglicherweise nicht dem unsterblichen Teil der Seele, sondern nur der Pflege des sterblichen Teils und der Begierden widmen könnten. Wir lesen:

Wer sich nun mit seinen Begierden oder ehrgeizigen Bestrebungen beschäftigt und sich um diese Dinge heftig bemüht, in dem müssen notwendig alle Meinungen in sterblicher Form entstehen, und der muss durchaus, soweit es möglich ist, sterblich zu werden, es darin an gar nichts fehlen lassen<sup>40</sup>.

Obgleich er also ein anderes Modell favorisiert, rechnet Platon also immerhin mit der Möglichkeit, dass auch die Pflege des sterblichen Selbst und der Begierden zu einer gewissen Perfektion des Sterblichen selbst führen können.

Genau dieser richtige Umgang mit dem sterblichen Selbst ist aber ein Leitmotiv des *Menoikeusbriefes*, der dann in dem Versprechen mündet, dass hier Perfektion zu erreichen sei. Wichtig hierfür ist nicht zuletzt jene ‚Beschäftigung‘ mit und richtige Wahl von Begierden. Sie ist bei Epikur in der Tat Voraussetzung für ein glückliches Leben und kann zur Vergöttlichung des sterblichen Selbst führen. Grundlage hierfür aber ist – wie der *Menoikeusbrief* betont – neben dem νήφων λογισμός eben jene ἀπλανής θεωρία, der es anders als bei Platon um empirische Erkenntnis im Diesseits geht. Freilich kann es sich für Epikur nur um ein Leben ‚wie ein Gott‘ nicht ‚als ein Gott‘ handeln, wie wir am Ende des *Menoikeusbriefes* lesen – ein Unterschied, auf den später Clemens Alexandrinus aufmerksam macht. Epikurs Perfektionieren des sterblichen Selbst mit Hilfe der θεωρία kann nur zum Status eines *deus mortal*is führen – und als ein solcher wird Epikur immer wieder und insbesondere von Lukrez im Proömium des 5. Buches gepriesen. Diesen Status aber hat Epikur nach Lukrez gerade deswegen erreicht, weil er die Natur richtig interpretiert hat, weil er auf die Natur – also die empirische Wirklichkeit – gehört, und weil er Entdeckungen gemacht hat, kurz weil er über ἀπλανής θεωρία verfügt<sup>41</sup>.

Nimmt man also Epikurs Hinweis im *Menoikeusbrief* auf Platons *Timaios* ernst, dann wird deutlich, dass nicht nur in der Wortwahl ἀπλανής θεωρία,

<sup>40</sup> Plat. *Tim.* 90b–c, üb. Schleiermacher, dazu Erler (2002) 164 ff.

<sup>41</sup> Vgl. Ep. *Ep. Herodot.* 35; Lucr. 5.1 ff.

sondern im Grund diese gesamte Argumentationsstruktur des Briefes vor dem Hintergrund des *Timaios* Profil erhält, wobei Konvergenzen, aber eben auch Divergenzen deutlich werden, die Platon aber im *Timaios* ebenfalls in Betracht zieht.

Beide Argumentationen vollziehen sich im Kontext der Kosmologie. Schon Stobaios charakterisiert Platons Ausführung kontextbedingt als φυσικῶς<sup>42</sup>, wobei Platon unter Natur freilich etwas anderes versteht als Epikur, der aber immerhin damit rechnet, dass man sich auf den Bereich der Vergänglichkeit konzentrieren könnte. Epikur kann sich mit seiner These auf ein Denkmodell berufen, das von Platon erwogen, wenn auch nicht favorisiert wird. Alles dies macht es plausibel, den *Menoikeusbrief* mit Blick auf den *Timaios* zu lesen, der ja für Epikurs Naturphilosophie generell von so großer Bedeutung war. Epikurs Vorstellungen von einem Leben, das sich an der θεωρία orientiert, bieten sich als Alternative zu jenem βίος θεωρητικός an, den Platon favorisiert. Über sprachliche Bezüge hinaus wirkt der *Menoikeusbrief* wie ein *interpretatio epicurea* wichtiger Partien dieses Dialoges. Schon Aristoteles hat den *Timaios* als eine Folie gewählt. Dabei setzte er wichtige Akzente und entwickelt Aspekte seiner Vorstellung vom θεωρητικός, insofern er den Vorrang des βίος θεωρητικός vor der *vita activa* besonders betonte. Für Platon hingegen besteht ein geradezu notwendiger Zusammenhang zwischen θεωρία und einer bestimmten Art von Praxis, die freilich nicht unbedingt traditionellen Vorstellungen vom βίος πολιτικός entsprechen. Es scheint mir bemerkenswert, dass sich auch hier neben Divergenzen auch Konvergenzen mit Epikurs Vorstellungen ergeben<sup>43</sup>.

Epikur scheint sich also als Vertreter des βίος θεωρητικός vorzustellen. Dies mag irritieren, bedenkt man, dass Epikur den praktischen Aspekt seiner Philosophie immer wieder hervorhebt. Im *Menoikeusbrief* selbst werden Vernunft oder θεωρία nicht als Werte an sich angepriesen, sondern als Grundlage für eine Wahl zwischen Begierden, für Vertreibung von irrigen Meinungen, welche Unruhe bereiten, und damit für die Möglichkeit gepriesen, wahre Lust, Ruhe, Sicherheit und Glück zu gewinnen. Auch in anderen Texten Epikurs wird die θεωρία der Natur als ein φάρμακον bezeichnet, das Beunruhigung beseitigen und eine Verfassung des Menschen herstellen soll, die dem Menschen Glück bereiten kann<sup>44</sup>. Bezeichnend ist Lukrez'

<sup>42</sup> Vgl. Stob. *Anth.* 2.7.3f.12–13.

<sup>43</sup> Vgl. Kullmann (1998) 38ff.; Erler (2007) 441 ff.; zu Epikurs Verhältnis zu seinen Vorgängern allgemein vgl. Erler (2010).

<sup>44</sup> Vgl. Ep. *De nat.* 14 col. 24.1ff. (Text in Leone [1984]).

Aufforderung bei Problemen, die sich aus Naturbetrachtung ergeben können, „weit und tief zu blicken“ (*latest alteque videndum*) und seine Feststellung: „Wenn du dir das richtig vor Augen stellst und es deutlich betrachtest und deutlich siehst, wirst du aufhören, dich über vieles zu wundern“<sup>45</sup>. Sich die Dinge vor Augen zu stellen (πρὸ ὁμμάτων τιθέναι) ist ein wichtiges Element epikureischer θεωρία, dient aber immer dem übergeordneten Zweck des Luststrebens<sup>46</sup>. Streben nach Lust aber ist für Epikur eine anthropologische Grundkonstante und Basis der Philosophie. Er unterscheidet sich hierin z. B. von Aristoteles, weil für den gerade das Sich-Verwundern und Streben nach Wissen zu den anthropologischen Grundkonstanten gehört und den Anfang der Philosophie bedeutet<sup>47</sup>. Theorie als Analyse der Wirklichkeit und philosophische Praxis als *philosophia medicans* oder Sorge für das eigene Selbst hängen eng miteinander zusammen, sind geradezu identisch. Θεωρία dient der Praxis. Freilich ist mit dieser Praxis nicht notwendig jene *vita activa*, jener βίος πολιτικός gemeint, wie man ihn traditionell versteht. Denn Epikurs Zurückhaltung gegenüber politischem Engagement ist bekannt und war in der Antike notorisch. Doch ist auch hier die Haltung der Epikureer differenzierter als es antike Polemik will<sup>48</sup>. Epikur hält Gesetz und Herrschaft, bisweilen auch politisches Engagement durchaus für ein Gut, wenn es für die Sicherheit und für das Zusammenleben der Menschen förderlich ist<sup>49</sup>. Doch gerade hier ist er skeptisch. Epikur ist überzeugt, dass das erstrebte Ziel des Menschen, Ruhe und Sicherheit durch Realpolitik nicht oder nur bedingt erreicht werden kann, jedoch durch die θεωρία der Natur erreichbar ist. „Es nützt nichts, sich Sicherheit von den Menschen zu verschaffen, solange uns die Dinge da oben, unter der Erde und überhaupt im unbegrenzten Raum unheimlich bleiben“. Grund für die Skepsis ist, dass nicht ‚traditionelle‘ Politik, sondern nur die θεωρία der Natur jene wahren Gründe für menschliche Irritation und Unsicherheit wie Furcht vor Tod, Gott oder anderen Menschen Rechnung tragen kann. „Es ist nicht möglich, die Furcht zu beseitigen, die wir hinsichtlich der wichtigsten Dinge

<sup>45</sup> Vgl. Lucr. 6.653 ff.: „quod bene propositum, si plane contueare ac videas plane, mirari multa relinquo“. Übersetzung von Martin (1972). Vgl. Ep. KD 12.

<sup>46</sup> Zur Methode des πρὸ ὁμμάτων τιθέναι vgl. Tsouna (2003) 243–247.

<sup>47</sup> Vgl. Ep. Ep. Men. 128–129. Zur Rolle des Staunens und Wunderns im Kontext der Theoriabestimmung vgl. Mette (1961); Nightingale (2004) 253 ff.; im Epikureismus geht es vor allem um das *mitte mirari* (Lucr. 6.489, 608, 655, 850, 910, dazu vgl. Clay [1983] 260 ff.).

<sup>48</sup> Vgl. Roskam (2007).

<sup>49</sup> Vgl. Erler (2008).

empfinden, wenn man nicht zur Einsicht in das Wesen des Alls gelangt ist, sondern etwas von der Art befürchtet, wie es die Mythen erzählen. Deshalb kann man unmöglich ohne Naturerkenntnis ungetrübte Lustempfindungen gewinnen<sup>50</sup>. Wirkliche Sicherheit, die von den Menschen kommt, erreicht man also durch Rückzug aus der Politik und durch Naturbetrachtung: Philosophie wird zum Politikersatz. Aus dieser Haltung heraus – epikureische Belehrung als Ersatz für Realpolitik – entschließt sich dann später Diogenes, im kleinasiatischen Oinoanda seine monumentale Inschrift aufzustellen.

Obleich ich mich – so begründete er seine Inschrift – nicht in die Politik einmische, verkünde ich diese Dinge mit Hilfe der Inschrift, als ob ich Politik betriebe<sup>51</sup>.

Βίος πολιτικός also als praktische Umsetzung des βίος θεωρητικός: Auch mit dieser Haltung steht Epikur Platon näher als es den Anschein hat, ja setzt eine Tradition fort, die Platons Sokrates im *Gorgias* begründet: Denn auch Platon hat ein ambivalentes Verhältnis zur Realpolitik und zu politischem Engagement. Die *Politeia* zeigt, dass im Idealfall Institutionen nicht Notwendigkeit sind, dass allerdings die Realität einen zweitbesten Staat – Magnesia – verlangt. Mehr noch: Auch bei Platon folgt aus der θεωρία gleichsam automatisch, dass die Seele des Philosophen ‚in Ordnung‘ kommt und damit die Chance zu Glück und Selbstvergöttlichung hat. Auch bei ihm ist philosophische Praxis der θεωρία gleichsam inhärent. Schließlich: Auch und gerade bei Platon wird der βίος πολιτικός transformiert zum βίος φιλόσοφος, und der βίος θεωρητικός ersetzt den βίος πολιτικός. Ausdrücklich erklärt sich Sokrates im *Gorgias*<sup>52</sup> zum ‚wahren Politiker‘, seine Philosophie zur wahren Politik und transformiert wichtige Elemente des politischen Lebens wie Rhetorik, Parrhesie, Aidos, Homologie zu Elementen dieser philosophisch-‚politischen‘ Seelsorge. Diese Tradition setzen Epikur und die Epikureer in gewisser Weise fort, indem sie durch ihre Belehrung ebenfalls für jene Sicherheit sorgen wollen, welche die Realpolitik nach ihrer Ansicht nicht bieten kann. Auch sie erhoffen sich im Idealfall, dass „alles voll sein [wird] von Gerechtigkeit und gegenseitiger Zuwendung; und mehr Mauern und Gesetze und alles, was wir für einander nötig haben, nicht mehr notwendig sein wird“<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>50</sup> Vgl. Ep. *KD* 13.12. Übersetzung von Müller (1988).

<sup>51</sup> Vgl. Ep. *KD* 14; Diog. Oen. frg. 3 I 4 (Smith [1993]); vgl. bes. frg. 3 I 4 ff. mit Roskam (2007) 131.

<sup>52</sup> Vgl. Plat. *Resp.* 500c; *Gorg.* 521d; vgl. auch Bonazzi, 150.

<sup>53</sup> Vgl. Diog. Oen. frg. 56 I 6 ff.



In beiden Fällen also geht es zunächst um die Fürsorge um die eigene Seele – dann aber auch um die Seelen der anderen. Freilich, bei Platon muss der Philosoph geradezu dazu gezwungen werden, sich von der θεωρία loszureißen und sich um die Seelen anderer zu kümmern, wie das Höhlengleichnis zeigt. Bei Epikur ist diese Seelsorge für andere eine Folge der Sorge um sich selbst und damit Resultat jener vernünftigen Überlegung, jenes Lustkalküls, von dem im *Menoikeusbrief* die Rede ist. Wieder erkennen wir wichtige Differenzen, aber auch Konvergenzen zwischen Epikurs und Platons Auffassung von der gewünschten Lebensform.

### V. Schluss

Blicken wir zum Schluss nochmals zurück, dann erweist sich Epikurs Haltung gegenüber der Frage, welche Lebensform zu wählen ist, als durchaus differenziert. Epikur steht für einen βίος θεωρητικός, der philosophische Praxis – sozusagen Sokrates' wahre Politik – gleichsam impliziert – ordnet jedoch beide jenem Streben nach Lust, dem βίος ἀπολαυστικός unter, der aber eben nicht als bloße animalische Lustbefriedigung zu verstehen ist –, sondern der von rationaler Überlegung und dem Streben nach Lust und Meiden von Schmerz und Furcht geleitet wird. Eben diese Grundlage führt bei Epikur zu einer Umwertung von βίος θεωρητικός und βίος πρακτικός.



## CICÉRON ET LE PROBLÈME DES GENRES DE VIE : UNE PROBLÉMATIQUE DE LA *VOLUNTAS* ?\*

Carlos Lévy

La question des genres de vie dans l'Antiquité a fait l'objet de nombreuses études, dont certaines sont consacrées plus précisément au cas de Cicéron, tout particulièrement intéressant puisque celui-ci représente le plus bel exemple d'acculturation de cette thématique philosophique à une société différente de celle dans laquelle elle était née<sup>1</sup>. Nous ne reviendrons pas sur ces travaux, mais nous nous interrogerons sur ce qui semble être une évidence. Il paraît, *a posteriori*, aller de soi que Cicéron n'aurait jamais pu se consacrer à une vie théorétique. C'est précisément cette idée d'une impossibilité absolue qui apparaît dans le titre du chapitre de J.-M. André (1966) consacré à notre auteur : «Cicéron et le drame de la retraite impossible». De quelle nature est cette «impossibilité»? Cela n'apparaît pas très clairement à la lecture des travaux que nous avons consultés. Si l'on se contente d'invoquer des pesanteurs anthropologiques ou sociologiques, deux exemples surgissent aussitôt, qui vont en sens contraire. Celui de Lucilius, chevalier, poète influencé à la fois par le stoïcisme de Panétius et par la Nouvelle Académie de Clitomaque, qui, à une époque antérieure à celle de Cicéron, il est vrai, décida de se maintenir loin du *cursus honorum* et de se consacrer à la littérature et à la fructification de sa fortune<sup>2</sup>. Celui d'Atticus ensuite, sur lequel il n'est pas utile d'insister, qui choisit de mener une vie de loisir conforme à ses intérêts à la fois matériels et philosophiques<sup>3</sup>. Cicéron lui-même fera dans le *Pro Cluentio*, prononcé en 66 av. J.-C., un vibrant éloge de la vie *tranquilla et quieta* des *equites*, dont il dit

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\* Cet article reprend, avec quelques modifications, une communication prononcée en anglais lors d'un colloque à l'Université Notre Dame en 2006. Je remercie le Professeur Walter J. Nicgorski, organisateur de ce colloque et éditeur de ses actes, qui a bien voulu autoriser la parution de cette version française de ma communication.

<sup>1</sup> Kretschmar (1938); Grilli (1953); Joly (1956); Barwick (1963); André (1966); Boyancé (1967); Müller (1989); Bénatouïl (2007) et (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Zucchelli (1977) 81–141; Manuwald (2001); Lintott (2008) 215–253 (“The search for *otium*”).

<sup>3</sup> Sur ce personnage, voir Benferhat (2005) 139–164, 166–170, 231–233.

ceci<sup>4</sup> : « Ils auraient pu s'élever au plus haut rang par les suffrages du peuple romain, s'ils avaient voulu se consacrer à la recherche des honneurs (« si sua studia ad honores conferre voluissent »). Ils avaient vu ce qu'une telle existence avait d'éclat, de titres, de prestige, ils ne l'avaient point méprisée, mais ils s'étaient contentés de la classe qui était la leur et celle de leurs parents. Ils avaient mieux aimé embrasser une vie tranquille et paisible, loin des orages déchaînés par les haines publiques et les tribunaux de ce genre ». Ces chevaliers nous sont présentés comme ayant fait un choix volontaire à l'opposé de celui de Cicéron, et pourtant il est très laudatif à leur égard. Il s'agira donc pour nous de tenter de comprendre sur quoi était fondée chez lui l'« impossibilité » de renoncer au politique et de montrer comment il a souvent évolué dans les modalités de justification de son choix, ou plus exactement de son absence de choix.

## I

Nous prendrons comme point de départ une phrase qui se trouve dans une lettre à Atticus en date du 5 décembre 61. Elle est en grande partie consacrée à la détérioration des rapports entre Atticus et Quintus, face à laquelle Cicéron exprime avec force son affection pour son ami. La phrase qui nous intéresse plus particulièrement est celle-ci<sup>5</sup> :

Je n'ignore rien, en effet, de ta noblesse de sentiments et de ta grandeur d'âme, et je n'ai jamais pensé qu'il y eût entre nous d'autre différence que celle de nos choix de vie : une certaine ambition m'a conduit à rechercher les honneurs ; d'autres idées, qui sont fort loin de mériter le blâme, t'ont conduit à d'honorables loisirs.

Que signifie exactement cette phrase ? Laissons de côté le fait que Cicéron, dans une situation affectivement un peu compliquée, où il est pris entre sa famille et Atticus, a tendance à se dévaloriser et, au contraire, à mettre en valeur le choix d'Atticus. Il convient de remarquer que l'organisation de la vie d'un individu dépend de la *voluntas*, laquelle prend dans la phrase

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<sup>4</sup> *Pro Cluentio* 153. Les traductions sont, sauf indication contraire, celles de la Collection des Universités de France.

<sup>5</sup> *Ad Att.* 1.17.5 : « Mihi enim est perspecta et ingenuitas et magnitudo animi tui. Neque ego inter me atque te quicquam interesse umquam duxi praeter voluntatem institutae vitae, quod me ambitio quaedam ad honorum studium, te autem alia minime reprehendenda ratio ad honestum otium duxit ». Trad. CUF modifiée.

deux formes : d'un côté, une forme passionnelle, l'*ambitio*<sup>6</sup>, de l'autre, une forme réfléchie, la *ratio*, associée à l'*otium*, faisant peut-être allusion ici au calcul rationnel des inconvénients et des avantages, sur lequel se construit l'éthique épicurienne. On remarquera que, dans cette lettre, la dualité volonté / jugement figure dès la première ligne de la lettre (« *varietas voluntatis et dissimilitudo opinionis ac iudicii Q. fratris mei* ») et qu'elle est reprise un peu plus loin, au § 7, à propos de la décision d'Atticus de ne pas aller en Asie : « *ut quod una non estis non dissensione ac discidio vestro sed voluntate ac iudicio tuo factum esse videatur* ». En d'autres termes, le choix de vie dépend pour Cicéron d'une puissance encore un peu mystérieuse, laquelle peut entrer en contradiction avec la raison ou, au contraire, s'harmoniser avec elle. Si nous nous référons au seul texte théorique écrit avant cette lettre, le *De inventionē*<sup>7</sup>, nous constatons que la *voluntas* y est très présente et qu'elle y apparaît comme une énigme que l'orateur doit déchiffrer pour percevoir les intentions de l'accusé ou du législateur<sup>8</sup>. Si nous admettons, au moins à titre d'hypothèse, cette donnée anthropologique, comment le choix de vie cicéronien s'organise-t-il et se justifie-t-il en fonction de ce binôme raison-volonté, dans lequel les deux termes peuvent tantôt se confondre et tantôt s'opposer ?

Peut-être pouvons-nous commencer par le début. Cicéron raconte dans le *Brutus* 306, que, lorsqu'en 88 av. J.-C., Philon de Larissa, le dernier scholarque de l'Académie, se réfugia à Rome, il suivit son enseignement avec un enthousiasme sans faille : « *totum ei me tradidi admirabili quodam ad philosophiam studio concitatus* ». Ce *totum* indique qu'il y avait dans cet engagement philosophique une unification de fonctions potentiellement discordantes. En effet, comme s'il prévoyait l'objection possible, à savoir : « mais pourquoi donc, dans ces conditions, n'êtes-vous pas devenu philosophe ? », il ajoute que cet enthousiasme était d'autant plus grand que le système judiciaire semblait arrêté définitivement, en raison des troubles qui agitaient Rome à ce moment. En d'autres termes, la situation qui prévalait, lorsque Cicéron terminait ses études, n'était pas très différente, au moins en ce qui concerne les tribunaux, de celle provoquée par la guerre civile et la victoire de César, le tout évoquant une circularité, une coïncidence, qui ne

<sup>6</sup> Le terme deviendra très négatif dans les traités philosophiques de la dernière période, voir, à titre d'exemple, *De off.* 1.25 : « *miserrima omnino est ambitio honorumque contentio* ».

<sup>7</sup> *De inv.* 1.3, 24, 55, 56, 70, 92, 102 ; 2.4, 35, 52, 64, 67, 90, 92, 94, 96, 97, 99, 101, 105, 107, 120, 123, 128, 137, 139, 140, 143, 145, 161, 163, 166.

<sup>8</sup> Voir en particulier *De inv.* 1.70.

semble pas avoir été remarquée, entre le jeune homme assidu aux leçons de Philon et le vieil homme qui se remettait à la philosophie. Bien sûr, nous avons là non pas un témoignage contemporain, mais une reconstruction par la mémoire de quelque chose qui s'était passé quarante ans auparavant. Néanmoins, on peut noter une distinction entre l'immense plaisir que lui procurait la philosophie (« *summa delectatione* ») et le monde du droit, évoqué par le terme de *ratio* qui, dans la phrase, ne désigne pas la raison individuelle, mais l'organisation judiciaire. D'un côté, une attirance qui est mise sur le compte de l'enthousiasme (« *studium* ») et du plaisir intellectuel, de l'autre, une réalité, le droit, qui est, au moins au niveau du signifiant, mise du côté de la raison. Ajoutons enfin que la phrase souligne l'importance du contexte de cette réaction à la philosophie, en précisant sa fonction : le fait que les tribunaux étaient inactifs ne déterminait pas la nature de la réaction à la philosophie, mais permettait à son enthousiasme d'avoir une intensité plus forte et plus constante (« *commorabar attentius* »). Par ailleurs, l'expression : « *totum ei me tradidi* », est suffisamment forte pour que l'on comprenne que l'intérêt pour l'enseignement s'accompagnait d'une admiration et d'une sympathie très fortes pour le maître. Le problème du choix de vie était celui d'un conflit d'identifications : ressembler à Antoine, à Crassus, ses maîtres romains, ou à Philon, son maître grec le plus admiré.

Si nous admettons donc que cette expérience fut fondamentale, et il n'y a aucune raison de croire le contraire, il faut admettre qu'elle conduisit Cicéron à se poser la question non seulement dans les termes traditionnels : vie théorétique, vie pratique, vie mixte (ou la vie apolaustique) – nous reviendrons sur ce point – mais aussi de la façon suivante :

- a. être Philon, c'est-à-dire non seulement philosophe, mais professeur de philosophie, occuper dans la société une situation qui ne commencera à être admise à Rome que bien plus tard, lorsque les Sextii créeront la première école philosophique spécifiquement romaine<sup>9</sup>. La structuration grecque du problème des *bioi* laissait de côté, ou en tout cas n'évoquait pas explicitement, la question sociologique qui, pour Cicéron, au contraire était essentielle, puisqu'il s'agissait pour l'*homo novus* de se définir par rapport à un système de castes<sup>10</sup>. Le cas de Philon présentait ceci d'intéressant par rapport à ses autres maîtres qu'après avoir été détenteur d'un pouvoir intellectuel institutionnel

<sup>9</sup> Voir Hadot (2007).

<sup>10</sup> Sur la situation de Cicéron par rapport à la tradition romaine, voir Linke-Stemmler (2000).

important, celui de scholarque de l'Académie, il s'était reconstitué à Rome un pouvoir beaucoup plus immatériel, celui qu'il exerçait par sa parole sur de jeunes romains. En même temps, sa disparition laissait vacante la plus prestigieuse des successions, celle de Platon. L'état d'abandon de l'Académie revient comme un leitmotiv dans les traités de la dernière période. L'*homo platonicus* Cicéron, que l'on traitait dans sa jeunesse de Γραικὸς καὶ σχολαστικός<sup>11</sup>, a dû probablement se demander à la fin de sa vie s'il n'était pas lui-même le dernier successeur de Platon, puisque son autre maître académicien, Antiochus d'Ascalon, qui avait rompu avec la structure institutionnelle de l'Académie en s'opposant à Philon, n'avait aucune légitimité ;

- b. vivre une vie dans laquelle la philosophie serait présente, sans pour autant occuper le premier rang, mais comment ?
- c. vivre de manière uniquement pratique ?

La première hypothèse était pour le jeune Cicéron inacceptable et peut-être même impensable, puisque le *mos maiorum* avait fixé, notamment dans les décennies précédentes, ce qui était en contradiction avec la *dignitas* romaine. Après les expulsions de philosophes et de rhéteurs grecs, les sanctions prises par Crassus contre les *rhetoires latini*, accusés de constituer un « *impudentiae ludus* »<sup>12</sup>, avaient illustré le refus romain d'une latinisation du système d'enseignement hérité du monde grec. Au demeurant, les modèles de sa jeunesse, Antoine et Crassus lui-même, avaient affirmé, si l'on en croit en tout cas le *De oratore*, que l'intérêt pour la culture grecque pouvait s'ancrer dans le respect de la tradition. Le plus audacieux conceptuellement, Crassus, faisait entrer la philosophie dans la formation de l'orateur, mais en appliquant à la culture un modèle politique : l'*imperium* appartenait à l'éloquence, la philosophie étant une province soumise à cet *imperium*. Quant à Antoine, il admettait tout au plus que la philosophie pouvait être une distraction passagère. Cependant, nous verrons que la fascination pour le modèle professoral continuera à être présente chez Cicéron et qu'elle se manifesterait avec éclat dans la dernière partie de sa vie, sans cependant qu'il l'assume jusqu'à ses conséquences ultimes, c'est-à-dire jusqu'à oser faire ce que mettront en oeuvre les Sextii. La troisième hypothèse, elle, était rendue impossible par l'intensité de l'intérêt qu'il avait

<sup>11</sup> Plut. *Vit. Cic.* 5.

<sup>12</sup> *De or.* 3.94. Voir sur cet épisode le commentaire de A.D. Leeman dans Leeman-Pinster-Wisse (1996) 304–306.

éprouvé au contact des philosophes. Lorsqu'il écrit dans le *De natura deorum*<sup>13</sup> : « c'est justement lorsque je paraissais le moins m'y adonner que je me consacrais le plus à la philosophie » et qu'il ajoute : « j'estime que, dans ma vie publique comme dans ma vie privée, j'ai appliqué les prescriptions de la raison et du savoir », il exprime d'une manière que l'on peut juger hyperbolique ce qui était pour lui une réalité incontestable, à savoir que la philosophie l'avait marqué d'une manière définitive. Nous nous trouvons donc confrontés au très problématique b).

## II

Le passage du *Brutus* explique comment il avait été enthousiasmé par la philosophie et pourquoi cet enthousiasme n'avait pas été contrarié par la vie publique, mais il ne permet pas explicitement de comprendre pourquoi il n'avait pas choisi une vie philosophique éloignée du forum, avec ou sans enseignement. Il est significatif que le premier texte écrit par Cicéron, le *proemium* du premier livre du *De inventione*, soit une légitimation de la vie engagée dans la politique, qu'il convient d'examiner dans le détail<sup>14</sup>.

Le *De inventione* devrait être daté de 88, si l'on voulait en rester à une interprétation littérale de l'indication de Cicéron lui-même disant qu'il avait écrit ce traité alors qu'il était *puer adulescentulus*. Comme il n'est pas impossible qu'il ait employé cette expression moins dans un souci de rigueur historique que pour présenter ce traité qu'il estimait bien médiocre comme une « erreur de jeunesse », on peut remonter, comme l'a fait G. Achard, jusqu'en 84–82<sup>15</sup>. Quoiqu'il en soit de ce problème, nous nous trouvons nécessairement dans une période dans laquelle Cicéron était encore directement sous l'influence de l'enseignement de Philon de Larissa, dont il convient de rappeler qu'il avait entrepris, chose surprenante pour un scholarque de l'Académie, d'enseigner à la fois la rhétorique et la philosophie, allant même jusqu'à traiter non seulement des *quaestiones*, des sujets généraux, mais des *causae*, des causes particulières<sup>16</sup>. Nous soulignerons les points suivants :

<sup>13</sup> *De nat. deor.* 1.6 : « [...] cum minime videbatur tum maxime philosophabatur [...] arbitramur nos et publicis et privatis in rebus ea praestitisse quae ratio et doctrina praecripserit », trad. pers.

<sup>14</sup> Voir Barwick (1961) 307–314 ; Giuffrida (1963) 113–216 ; Alfonsi (1975) 111–120 ; von Albrecht (1984) 19–24 ; Schmitz (1995) 41–53 ; Lévy (1995) 155–168.

<sup>15</sup> Achard (1994) 6–10.

<sup>16</sup> Voir *De or.* 3.110, où Cicéron situe le début de l'enseignement de rhétorique de Philon



- le *proemium* se présente comme une *thesis*, autrement dit, une de ces « discussions à double issue, dans lesquelles il est possible de discuter avec abondance et de manière contradictoire d'un genre dans sa totalité »<sup>17</sup>. Il s'agit de savoir si l'éloquence cause plus de bien ou de mal aux individus et aux nations. Ce choix binaire est lui-même complété par un constat qui l'est tout autant : l'expérience et la mémoire personnelle montrent que des hommes très éloquents ont fait beaucoup de mal aux plus grands Etats, tandis que les témoignages d'ordre historique et littéraire révèlent que, dans un passé lointain, l'éloquence a eu un rôle positif dans l'histoire des relations entre les nations ;
- la solution à cette contradiction est donnée immédiatement et c'est la raison elle-même (« *ratio ipsa* ») qui la dicte, par la définition d'un critère de choix, à savoir l'utilité<sup>18</sup> : la sagesse sans éloquence est peu utile aux cités, tandis que l'éloquence sans sagesse est le plus souvent nuisible, et en tout cas jamais utile. Le citoyen armé de la philosophie et de la rhétorique sera, lui, *utilissimus atque amicissimus*. On remarquera que cette solution n'est logiquement acceptable que si l'on admet que l'association : éloquence+philosophie est localisée dans le passé, tandis que l'éloquence seule se situe dans le passé récent. Autrement dit, la position du problème et la solution proposée évoquent une pensée de la décadence.

Là où l'on attendrait une évocation immédiate, c'est un mythe qui nous est fourni, qui reprend le thème sophistique des débuts malheureux de l'humanité, mais de manière totalement atypique, avec quelques échos platoniciens, sur lesquels nous ne nous attarderons pas ici. De même nous ne reviendrons pas sur les raisons pour lesquelles nous ne croyons pas que ce mythe soit d'origine isocratique. En revanche, il nous paraît important de souligner que c'est bien un mythe, autrement dit qu'il ne comporte qu'une vérité relative. Pour affirmer que l'homme qui permit le passage de la vie sauvage à la civilisation était à la fois éloquent et sage, Cicéron emploie le verbe *videtur*, lequel revient pour évoquer la période dans laquelle l'éloquence fut bénéfique, et c'est *veri simillimum* que nous

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en 91, date à laquelle est censé se dérouler le dialogue, sans qu'on puisse savoir s'il s'agit d'une donnée historique ou d'une projection dans le passé des cours que Cicéron suivit à Rome lorsque Philon s'y installa en 88.

<sup>17</sup> *De or.* 3.107 : « *incipitis disputationes in quibus de universo genere in utramque partem dissereri copiose licet* ».

<sup>18</sup> *De inv.* 1.1.

trouvons à propos du processus de décadence qui va faire que l'on aura, d'un côté à la tête de la *res publica* des hommes éloquents mais cyniques («*temerarii atque audaces*»), tandis que les hommes les mieux doués se retireraient dans l'*otium*<sup>19</sup> :

- il est important de noter que le couple *voluntas / ratio* se retrouve au cœur du mythe. Pour que les villes puissent subsister, il faut que les habitants acceptent d'obéir *sua voluntate* aux ordres d'autrui et cela ne peut se faire que si les gouvernants font appel à l'éloquence pour communiquer ce qu'ils ont trouvé grâce à la raison («*ea quae ratione invenissent*»)<sup>20</sup>. Cette éducation de la volonté nous est présentée comme le moyen de passer à un état de droit par la renonciation à la violence de ceux qui possédaient la force physique. L'éloquence est donc, dans un tel contexte, ce qui permet de rationaliser la volonté d'autrui ;
- la connexion entre le mythe et le *mos maiorum* se fait lorsque, après avoir évoqué la période – chronologiquement indéterminée – où la sagesse et l'éloquence étaient exercées chacune de leur côté, Cicéron évoque ces hautes figures du *mos maiorum* qu'étaient Caton, Scipion Emilien et Lélius, présentés comme des paradigmes de la *virtus*<sup>21</sup>.

Il est évident que ce texte, même s'il prétend étudier les deux termes d'une alternative, a en réalité pour finalité de légitimer la solution qui consiste à s'engager dans la vie politique. Sa valeur démonstrative est, d'un point de vue logique, assez faible. Signalons quels sont les points qui font problème :

- l'articulation maladroite entre un mythe et une ambition historiographique qui ne précise aucun repère chronologique précis ;
- la confusion à propos de *sapientia* entre un sens général (les qualités humaines d'un individu, comme celles des trois grands Romains évoqués) et un sens plus technique, comme au § 1, où il est question de deux des trois parties de la philosophie : la logique et la morale. De ce fait, lorsque Cicéron dit au § 5<sup>22</sup> : « c'est l'éloquence qui fait affluer dans l'Etat une foule d'avantages, du moins si la sagesse qui règle toute chose, l'accompagne », le critère de cette sagesse est pour le moins vague ;

<sup>19</sup> *De inv.* 1.3, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *De inv.* 1.3.

<sup>21</sup> *De inv.* 1.5.

<sup>22</sup> *De inv.* 1.5 : «*Nam hinc ad rem publicam plurima commoda veniunt, si moderatrix omnium rerum praesto est sapientia : hinc ad ipsos, qui eam adepti sunt, laus, honos, dignitas, confluit*».

- le texte ne propose en réalité aucun choix, mais vise à montrer que l'on doit s'engager dans les affaires publiques, pratiquer l'éloquence et posséder une science politique («*civilis quaedam ratio*») qui inclut la philosophie, mais selon des modalités extrêmement vagues. On remarquera qu'au § 8 Cicéron condamne la prétention d'Hermagoras de confier à l'orateur des questions comme «Y a-t-il un autre bien que la vertu?» ou «Les sens sont-ils fidèles?». La distinction de la rhétorique et de la philosophie est donc nécessaire dans un premier temps, pour donner lieu ensuite à leur association.
- en réalité tout se passe comme si l'attitude mimétique que Cicéron aurait pu développer par admiration pour Philon avait été réprimée au profit de celle, plus conforme au *mos maiorum*, qui va faire qu'il se fixera comme modèles les grands hommes de la tradition, ceux qu'il mettra en scène dans le *De oratore* et le *De re publica*.

### III

L'image de ce que pouvait être cette nécessaire complémentarité de la parole-action et de la culture-sagesse se trouve dans le *Pro Archia*<sup>23</sup>, prononcé en 62. Les *litterae* ne peuvent occuper que les moments où les activités de la cité sont suspendues, elles ont une double fonction : permettre un repos réparateur après la tension («*contentio*») du forum, mais aussi enrichir l'éloquence pour mieux la mettre au service d'autrui. Sur la question laissée sans réponse par le *De inventione*, à savoir la relation entre la sagesse innée et celle que l'on acquiert par la philosophie, des précisions sont cette fois apportées. Cicéron affirme que sa propre qualité morale s'est forgée grâce aux préceptes et aux exemples qu'il a trouvés dans les livres, il ne conteste pas que certains individus puissent avoir par nature une qualité morale supérieure («*naturam eximiam atque illustrem*»), mais il affirme que, même dans ce cas, la *doctrina* permet de se surpasser. Il y a donc une justification productiviste de la culture, production de plaisir, production d'éthique, qui à aucun moment ne menace le seul type de vie considéré comme digne d'un véritable citoyen, la vie politique. La culture est définie comme un conservatoire de modèles d'action, parmi lesquels Cicéron espérait bien figurer un jour.

<sup>23</sup> *Pro Arch.* 15. Sur ce dialogue, et tout particulièrement sur la gloire comme récompense de l'action politique, cf. Narducci (1997) 3–18.

## IV

Dans la période qui va du *De inventione* à l'année 59, les textes ne manquent pas, dans lesquels affleure l'expression d'une tentation de vie d'*otium*, mais cela ne va pas au-delà de vœux pieux. Ainsi, dans le *Pro Murena*<sup>24</sup>, il dit que les tourments auxquels il est affronté dans la vie publique lui ont fait souvent envier le calme et la tranquillité de ceux qui se sont éloignés de toute ambition. Contrairement à ce qui a pu être affirmé, nous ne croyons pas qu'il s'agisse là nécessairement d'« une ruse oratoire »<sup>25</sup>. Il suffit de noter que tous les termes utilisés par Cicéron pour se décrire évoquent soit le raisonnement (« iudicarem ») soit les affects (« adfectus », « miserari »), mais qu'aucun ne fait référence à la *voluntas*. Il s'agit donc tout simplement de pensées qui ne débouchent pas sur une réelle volonté de changer de vie. Cela est affirmé de manière assez explicite dans le *Pro Sulla*, contemporain du *Pro Murena*, où Cicéron dit que les services qu'il a rendus à la patrie lui donneraient le droit de réclamer un *honestum otium*, et qu'il préfère cependant continuer à se dévouer pour la patrie<sup>26</sup>. La *voluntas* est présente dans ce texte, à travers l'usage du verbe *postulo*, mais uniquement pour montrer que, loin d'être engagée dans un processus de choix, elle est intensément impliquée dans le service des autres.

En ce qui concerne ce que J.-M. André a appelé « la crise de 59 », comment se présente la problématique du choix ? Il est certain que le changement de la situation politique, marqué par l'accroissement du pouvoir des triumvirs, ne permettait plus de poser le problème des *bioi* dans les mêmes termes qu'à l'époque du *Pro Archia*.

La lettre *Ad Att.* 2.5, en date d'avril 59 est celle du désir, qui est tout autre chose que la volonté<sup>27</sup>. Cicéron désire se rendre à Alexandrie et dans le reste de l'Égypte (« cupio Alexandriam reliquamque Aegyptum visere »), il désire

<sup>24</sup> *Pro Mur.* 55: « Nam cum saepe antea, iudices, et ex aliorum miseriis et ex meis curis laboribusque cotidianis fortunatos eos homines iudicarem qui remoti a studiis ambitionis otium ac tranquillitatem vitae secuti sunt, tum vero in his L. Murenæ tantis tamque improvisis periculis ita sum animo adfectus ut non queam satis neque communem omnium nostrum condicionem neque huius eventum fortunamque miserari ».

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Joly (1956) 159.

<sup>26</sup> *Pro Sul.* 26: « Ego, tantis a me beneficiis in re publica positus, si nullum aliud mihi prae-mium ab senatu populoque Romano nisi honestum otium postulare, quis non concederet ? [...] Quid si hoc non postulo ? [...] si voluntas mea, si industria, si domus, si animus, si aures patent omnibus ».

<sup>27</sup> André (1966), 295, écrit : « la volonté affichée n'aura été qu'une velléité ». Le problème est que Cicéron, toujours très attentif au sens précis des mots n'a jamais parlé de « volonté ».

renoncer à toutes ses activités et se consacrer entièrement à la philosophie, c'est-à-dire retrouver la situation qui était la sienne au moment où il suivait l'enseignement de Philon. Le verbe *volo* ne figure qu'au subjonctif de l'irréel («vellem»), autrement dit il n'y a à aucun moment un véritable engagement dans un choix, tout se passe au niveau de désirs et d'idées qui circulent *in animo*<sup>28</sup>. Pourquoi cette incapacité qu'il qualifie lui-même de *levitas*? Parce qu'il reste profondément attaché à la vie politique, convaincu que la cause des *optimates*, gravement compromise, n'est peut-être pas totalement perdue.

La lettre *Ad Att.* 2.16, probablement la plus célèbre de celles qui concernent la question des genres de vie, en date de mai 59 semble, elle, passer du désir à la décision puisque le fameux passage commence par un *statui*. Cicéron paraît effectivement cette fois-ci choisir entre la vie pratique, symbolisée par Dicéarque, et la vie théorétique, symbolisée par Théophraste, ou plus exactement, il semble décidé à établir «un harmonieux balancement» entre les deux types de vie<sup>29</sup>. Il retrouverait ainsi l'inspiration d'Antiochus d'Ascalon, dont nous savons par Augustin qu'il distinguait trois types de vie: l'un voué à la contemplation, l'autre consacré à la conduite des affaires humaines, le troisième fait de «l'un et l'autre types harmonieusement associés»<sup>30</sup>. Antiochus, dit Augustin, préférerait le genre mixte<sup>31</sup>: «De ces trois genres de vie – oisif, actif, mixte – c'est le troisième qu'ils avaient coutume de privilégier. C'était là l'opinion et l'enseignement des anciens académiciens, d'après ce qu'affirme Varron, sur la foi d'Antiochus». Les choses sont, en réalité, beaucoup moins simples. Remarquons tout d'abord l'ironie qui fait que Dicéarque, théoricien de la vie active, est présenté comme le *familiaris* de l'épicurien Atticus, tandis que l'homme politique Cicéron se qualifie lui-même d'*amicus* de Théophraste, philosophe de la vie théorétique. Par ailleurs, il n'y a pas de véritable choix de la part de Cicéron, mais plutôt le constat qu'il a fait tout ce qu'il devait pour le *praktikos bios* et que,

<sup>28</sup> *Ad Att.* 2.5.2: «Vide levitatem meam. Sed quid ego haec, quae cupio deponere et toto animo atque omni cura φιλοσοφῆν? Sic, inquam, in animo est; vellem ab initio, nunc vero, quoniam quae putavi esse praeclara, expertus sum quam essent inania, cum omnibus Musis rationem habere cogito». Les manuscrits donnent: *uidele evit-*, ou *uidele civit-*, ou *uidele vitam*. Meuntz a proposé: *vilitatem*. Il est, en tout cas, intéressant de noter comment *vellem* est réduit à un simple *cogito* à la fin de la phrase.

<sup>29</sup> André (1966) 294.

<sup>30</sup> *De civ. Dei* 19.3: «ex tribus porro illis vitae generibus, otioso, actiuo et quod ex utroque compositum est, hoc tertium sibi placere adseverat. Haec sensisse ac docuisse Academicos veteres Varro adserit, auctore Antiocho, magistro Ciceronis et suo». Cf. sur ce point, Müller (1968) 222–237 et Bénatouïl (2009) 20–24.

<sup>31</sup> *De civ. Dei* 19.3.

dégagé de cette obligation, il peut passer à l'autre type de vie. Ajoutons enfin que ce qui est dit des deux vies ne va pas du tout dans le sens d'une conciliation harmonieuse à l'intérieur d'un *bios miktos*, mais bien d'une relation agonistique entre les deux, puisqu'il dit qu'il n'aurait jamais dû s'éloigner de la vie théorétique. La phrase «*respicio nunc ad hanc familiam*», pose, elle, un véritable problème d'identification. Le démonstratif de la première personne et le préfixe *re* laissent penser qu'il fait allusion ici à la philosophie académicienne dans sa version antiochienne, autrement dit celle qui associe l'Académie et le Lycée et qui permettrait donc de récupérer Théophraste. Cependant la phrase est rédigée de telle sorte qu'elle convient mieux encore à l'épicurisme, favorisant ainsi l'association avec Atticus dans la phrase ultérieure. En réalité, plutôt que des identifications philosophiques trop précises, il faut interpréter cela comme un rappel nostalgique de la période, si bien évoquée au début du livre 5 du *De finibus*, où Cicéron et Atticus, fréquentaient les écoles philosophiques à Athènes, l'un allant écouter Antiochus, l'autre Phèdre.

## V

Avant même ces deux grandes œuvres théoriques que sont le *De oratore* et le *De re publica*, le *Pro Sestio*, prononcé en 56, constitue une réflexion sur les genres de vie bien plus approfondie que tout ce que Cicéron avait écrit précédemment<sup>32</sup>. Rappelons que, contrairement au temps confusément mythico-historique du *De inventione*, le *Pro Sestio* définit dès le début de cet excursus une sorte d'éternité de l'*Vrbs* («*duo genera semper in hac civitate fuerunt*») et distingue deux catégories d'hommes politiques : ceux qui flattent une masse indifférenciée («*multitudo*») et ceux qui sont au service des *optimi*, catégorie volontairement définie de manière extrêmement vague, puisqu'elle va des *principes consili publici* aux affranchis, pour peu qu'il s'agisse de gens moralement irréprochables et ayant une situation économique saine. Il va de soi que dans un texte de ce type Cicéron ne pouvait pas évoquer ni les philosophes ni les amateurs de philosophie, catégories sociologiquement infimes dans la société romaine, mais un homme comme Atticus entrait évidemment dans cette définition des *optimi*. Si la philosophie n'est donc jamais explicitement évoquée, elle est présente, et pas seulement dans la fameuse expression *otium cum dignitate*. Voyons ce qu'il en est.

<sup>32</sup> *Sest.* 96–143.

On remarquera tout d'abord que l'homme politique se voit assigner un *propositum*, terme qui est appliqué dans le *De finibus* au souverain bien, au *telos*<sup>33</sup>. Ce *propositum* est qualifié d'*optabile*, terme qui figure lui aussi dans l'exposé de la téléologie stoïcienne<sup>34</sup>. Il peut simplement faire l'objet d'une contemplation («intueri») et d'une aspiration forte («volunt»), mais il n'est pas fait pour rester purement théorique. Nous trouvons dans l'idée que le *propositum* ne se réalise que chez ceux qui agissent («qui efficiunt») une anticipation de la fameuse formule du *De re publica*<sup>35</sup>: «virtus in usu sui tota posita est». La différence est que, dans le *De re publica*, l'*otium* est condamné comme étant celui de philosophes qui proclament *in angulis* des principes qui sont purement verbaux. Le *Pro Sestio*, si on laisse de côté la violente attaque contre l'*otium* épicurien dont Pison serait le défenseur, définit au contraire une politique à deux niveaux, comme il y a dans le stoïcisme, *mutatis mutandis*, une éthique à deux niveaux, celui du relatif, l'*officium*, et celui de l'absolu, l'*honestum*. Comme dans l'éthique stoïcienne, ce qui fait la différence, ce n'est pas une dualité de réalités, mais l'attitude à l'égard d'une même réalité, en l'occurrence l'*otium cum dignitate*<sup>36</sup>. Tous les *optimi* souhaitent que la société soit paisible et qu'elle fonctionne de manière hiérarchique, mais les meilleurs des meilleurs sont ceux qui font que cela se réalise pour l'ensemble de la société et pas seulement pour eux-mêmes. On ajoutera encore que l'expression «membra tueri», pour désigner ce que les *summi viri* doivent protéger, figure dans la version antiochienne de l'*oikeiôsis* au livre 4 du *De finibus*<sup>37</sup>. L'idée stoïcienne selon laquelle la qualité morale d'un individu ne peut pas être dissociée de la préservation d'un organisme, à la fois singulier et collectif se trouve donc bien présente dans ce texte de nature rhétorique.

La comparaison avec le stoïcisme a évidemment des limites. L'argumentation cicéronienne évite ici le principal reproche qui était fait aux Stoïciens, à savoir de déterminer un but qui n'était pas en lui-même bon, mais dont le choix était conforme au bien. Pour échapper au reproche de circularité, ceux-ci avaient développé des stratégies complexes dans le détail

<sup>33</sup> Voir *De fin.* 3.22 ; 4.46.

<sup>34</sup> *De fin.* 3.46.

<sup>35</sup> *Resp.* 1.2.

<sup>36</sup> Sur cette formule et ses nuances aristotéliennes, Boyancé (1948) 172–191, conserve toute sa pertinence.

<sup>37</sup> *Pro Sest.* 98: «membra quae tuenda principibus». L'expression revient au §99, sous la forme suivante: «conservatis iis quae ego paulo ante fundamenta ac membra esse dixi». Le verbe *conservare* est utilisé dans l'expression de l'*oikeiôsis* en *De fin.* 4.41.

desquelles il n'est pas utile de rentrer ici. Au contraire, pour Cicéron, il va de soi que l'*otium cum dignitate* est à rechercher, parce qu'il constitue un bien en soi. Les forces qui pratiquent l'agitation révolutionnaire («*motus conversionesque rei publicae*», au § 99), ne sont pas à ses yeux des forces de changement, mais des forces de mort, qui n'hésiteraient pas à provoquer une conflagration universelle, une sorte d'*ekpurôsis* sociale destinée à les préserver eux-mêmes: «*communi incendio malint quam suo deflagrare*». En assimilant les *optimates* à la survie dans la dignité de la société et les *populares* à sa destruction violente, Cicéron ne laisse pas de place pour le choix, tant celui-ci est dicté par la nature. Pour les Stoïciens, l'être vivant à la naissance recherche instinctivement la vie, mais dans la vie morale, celle-ci est un indifférent préférable. La pensée politique de Cicéron fait, en ce qui concerne la société, un amalgame de ces deux aspects.

Si l'on tente d'approfondir la question de la causalité de l'engagement du côté des *populares* ou du côté des *optimates*, nous retrouvons un certain nombre de philosophèmes. Les *populares* sont au corps social ce que la passion est à l'individu. Deux aux moins des passions stoïciennes sont évoquées à leur sujet: la peur («*propter metum poenae*») et le désir (sous la forme du désir d'argent), mais surtout ils représentent, au moins pour certains d'entre eux, le *furor insitus*, la folie profondément installée en l'âme, qui sera théorisée dans les *Tusculanes*<sup>38</sup>. Les *optimates* qui s'engagent dans la lutte pour l'*otium cum dignitate* et qui prennent en charge pour la réaliser la *voluntas populi*<sup>39</sup> le font au nom de cette *oikeiôsis* sociale revisitée par Cicéron, mais aussi d'une rationalité de la rétribution, puisqu'ils sont récompensés par les honneurs, la gloire, thème sur lequel Cicéron théoriserait dans le *De officiis* et le *De gloria*. Non seulement il faut s'engager dans la lutte pour l'*otium cum dignitate*, mais on a intérêt à le faire. C'est la version rhétorico-politique de l'identification entre l'*honestum* et l'*utile* qui sera théorisée notamment dans le *De officiis*. La lutte entre les deux groupes, entre la *popularis cupiditas* et le *consilium principum*<sup>40</sup>, est, elle, l'expression sociale de l'affrontement entre la raison et le désir. Mais à aucun moment Cicéron ne met en scène un choix qui serait comparable à celui d'Hercule placé entre le vice et le plaisir, préférant plutôt procéder à une ontologisation des catégories politiques de *populares* et d'*optimates*.

<sup>38</sup> *Tusc. Disp.* 4.26–27.

<sup>39</sup> *Pro Sest.* 122.

<sup>40</sup> *Pro Sest.* 104.



Il ne nous semble pas que le *De oratore* et *De re publica* modifient véritablement les thèmes développés dans le *Pro Sestio*. Bien sûr, dans le second dialogue, Scipion dévalorise en des termes extrêmement durs la conception de la gloire défendue dans le discours<sup>41</sup> : « jamais la réputation d'un homme n'a duré longtemps ; elle s'ensevelit au moment où meurent ceux qui l'ont faite et elle s'éteint, en raison de l'oubli des générations suivantes ». Cependant l'affirmation que l'action vertueuse doit être faite pour elle-même et non pour la renommée, l'invitation à mépriser les *humana* et à contempler les *caelestia*<sup>42</sup> n'implique nullement une évolution vers la vie théorétique. La voie qui conduit au ciel n'est pas celle de la philosophie, mais celle de l'action politique, dont il est dit qu'elle est le champ d'action le plus vaste pour l'exercice des vertus. Pour le reste, l'idéal demeure d'ajouter à une nature exceptionnelle et à une action politique éclatante l'*adventicia doctrina* issue de Socrate<sup>43</sup>. Cette fois, il est vrai, le choix est mis en scène sous la forme d'un *bivium*, et l'usage du potentiel (« *sin sit deligenda* ») montre qu'il n'est pas exclu *a priori* de se consacrer à une vie théorétique, mais aucune place n'est laissée à l'incertitude : « *haec civilis laudabilior certe est et inlustrior* ».

## VI

Chacun sait que l'*otium honestum* s'imposera à Cicéron comme une alternative non pas à la vie politique dont il était désormais éloigné, mais à la *desidia* à laquelle aurait pu le contraindre la dictature de César<sup>44</sup>. Tout ou presque a été dit sur sa volonté de doter Rome d'une grande littérature philosophique, sur l'illusion de pouvoir, malgré tout, avoir un rôle dans la *res publica* grâce à sa réflexion politique<sup>45</sup>, voire grâce à une influence sur César, comme le montre le *Pro Marcello*. La prise en compte de la nouvelle situation s'accompagne d'une justification de l'*otium litteratum* qui reprend le thème de la légitimité du loisir culturel après une existence intensément consacrée à la *res publica*. Il ne savait que trop que la *dignitas* qui accompagnait cet *otium* n'était qu'apparente et ne tenait qu'à la relative bienveillance de César. Ce que nous allons étudier, c'est la résurgence de la

<sup>41</sup> *Resp.* 6.25.

<sup>42</sup> *Resp.* 6.20.

<sup>43</sup> *Resp.* 3.6.

<sup>44</sup> *Brutus* 9 : « *in portum non inertiae neque desidia, sed oti moderati atque honesti* ».

<sup>45</sup> *Ad fam.* 9.2.5.

tentation d'être Philon, c'est-à-dire, répétons-le, non seulement philosophe, mais professeur de philosophie. Nous distinguerons pour cela trois cas : en premier, les *Academica*, le *De finibus*, le *De natura deorum*, le *De divinatione* ; en second les *Tusculanes* ; enfin le *De fato*.

Dans le premier groupe, Cicéron, tout en proclamant sa passion de la philosophie et sa volonté de créer une philosophie de langue latine, ne peut pas, pour des raisons évidentes de *decus*, donner une représentation de ce magistère dans les dialogues. C'est, en quelque sorte, un amateur plus éclairé que les autres qui discute avec ses amis, à dignité égale ou presque. Cela n'était pas sans conséquence sur l'économie même du dialogue, la suspension universelle de l'assentiment s'harmonisant fort bien avec la contrainte sociale qui voulait que dans de telles discussions il n'y eût ni vainqueur ni vaincu. Lorsque les interlocuteurs du *Lucullus* ou du *De natura deorum*, pour ne citer que les deux exemples les plus clairs à mon sens, se séparent, nul n'a perdu la face, nul n'est considéré comme détenteur de la vérité, il n'y a que des préférences croisées. Dans les *proemia* de ces discours, Cicéron cherche à montrer qu'il n'y a pas de discontinuité entre sa vie publique et l'*otium*, puisque, dans l'un et l'autre cas, il agit dans l'intérêt de la *res publica*. Le magistère philosophique s'adresse à l'ensemble du peuple romain, et de ce fait on reste, d'une certaine manière, dans le domaine de l'activité publique.

Ce sont les *Tusculanes* qui traduisent le premier effort pour sortir de cette situation. C'est là que, par un certain nombre de signes assez nets, Cicéron indique qu'il assume sa fonction de professeur, non pas abstraitement, par rapport à l'ensemble du peuple romain, mais au sens de l'institution scolaire grecque. Cela se traduit par l'utilisation de l'expression «*scholas Graecorum more*», ou encore celle du verbe *ambulo*, qui renvoie évidemment à l'espace du *peripatos* des écoles philosophiques grecques, et surtout le fait que le second dialogue est placé sous le patronage de Philon de Larissa, dont il nous est dit qu'il avait assuré, à des moments différents de la journée, des cours de philosophie et de rhétorique<sup>46</sup>. Cette mise en scène qui transformait la villa de Tusculum en école romaine de philosophie impliquait néanmoins une contrainte, à savoir que l'interlocuteur fût anonyme, car il eût été outrepassant de présenter l'un des *familiares* présents dans la villa comme un simple *discipulus* de Cicéron, écoutant de longs exposés avec pour seul droit de faire de très brèves interventions. Dans les

<sup>46</sup> *Tusc. Disp.* 1.7 ; 2.10 et 26. Sur cette question, voir Lévy (2002) 78–84 et Gildenhard (2008).

*Disputationes*, Cicéron se présente donc comme le scholarque d'une école dont les disciples ont été rendus anonymes, précisément parce qu'il était impossible d'aller jusqu'au bout du processus qui faisait que la métaphore du procès, si présente dans les dialogues précédents, laissait place à la réalité originellement étrangère de l'école philosophique. C'est également dans le *proemium* du livre 2 de cette œuvre que le fameux vers du *Néoptolème* d'Ennius, disant qu'il voulait bien philosopher, mais peu, car il ne souhaitait pas s'y consacrer entièrement, se trouve contredit par Cicéron au profit d'un engagement total dans la philosophie. On notera une variante intéressante qui en dit long sur l'état d'esprit de Cicéron :

ac sic decrevi philosophari potius, ut Neoptolemus apud Ennium, nam omnino haud placet; (De or. 2.156)

ait philosophari velle sed paucis; nam omnino non placere; (Resp. 1.30)

Neoptolemus quidem apud Ennium philosophari sibi ait necesse, sed paucis; nam omnino non placere. Ego autem, Brute, necesse mihi quidem esse arbitror philosophari (nam quid possum, praesertim nihil agens, agere melius?), sed non paucis, ut ille; (Tusc. Disp. 1.1)

Le *necesse* de Néoptolème se trouve transféré à Cicéron lui-même (« *necesse mihi quidem esse arbitror philosophari* ») et évite l'emploi d'un verbe exprimant la volonté. A travers cette sorte de lapsus, la vie philosophique apparaît comme étant d'abord une contrainte, à laquelle il est possible de trouver par la suite des justifications. Elle s'impose parce qu'il n'existe rien de mieux, en principe, mais aussi, notation lourde d'ambiguïté, parce que Cicéron n'a aucune possibilité d'action politique en un tel moment.

Le *De fato* nous semble constituer un moyen terme entre les deux situations précédentes. Comme dans les dialogues du premier groupe, Cicéron s'entretient avec un haut personnage de la politique romaine, et cet entretien est placé sous les auspices de l'Académie. La principale différence, soulignée par l'auteur lui-même, réside dans le fait que la *disputatio in utramque partem* se trouve remplacée par la méthode du *contra propositum disserere*, pratiquée déjà précédemment dans les *Tusculanes*<sup>47</sup>. A en croire Cicéron, ce changement de méthode ne serait dû qu'à un *casus*, sans doute l'arrivée fortuite chez lui d'Hirtius qui lui avait demandé une sorte de cours de philosophie. Mettre un ouvrage sur le destin sous le signe du *casus* constituait déjà un clin d'œil, l'annonce de la couleur philosophique en quelque sorte, à savoir que les actions humaines ne sont pas régies par le

<sup>47</sup> *De fato* 4.

destin. Mais il nous semble qu'il faut aller plus loin dans l'analyse et tenter de comprendre quel est l'enjeu de cette confrontation entre les deux personnages. Par rapport à l'audace très contrôlée des *Tusculanes*, le *De fato* représente une sorte de solution intermédiaire. Cicéron s'assume comme maître, la référence à Philon de Larissa, pour être implicite n'en est pas moins évidente, le disciple cette fois nommé, Hirtius, indique qu'il a déjà suivi des cours de rhétorique<sup>48</sup>, mais précisément il s'agit d'un disciple et non d'une école. Autrement dit, la situation maître-disciple résulte d'un accord réciproque entre les deux personnages, et non d'une institutionnalisation du dialogue.

Le bilan de ce rapide survol ne peut être que contrasté. Cicéron s'est donné tous les moyens conceptuels de penser un choix qu'il n'a jamais voulu véritablement assumer, probablement parce que la fascination exercée sur lui par les grands noms du passé romain, la conviction qu'il avait un rôle important à jouer dans la survie de la *res publica*, et sa passion pour les honneurs, tout cela faisait qu'il ne pouvait se détacher de cette vie publique dont, par ailleurs, il voyait lucidement tous les aspects négatifs. De ce point de vue, la correspondance, en lui permettant d'exprimer assez librement cette partie de lui-même qui ne pouvait passer au premier plan que lorsque les circonstances rendaient impossible la vie politique, lui a sans doute permis d'atténuer la contradiction. Le fait que, malgré toutes les épreuves, les désillusions et la conscience de pouvoir servir la *res publica* en la dotant d'une philosophie en langue latine, il ait pu écrire, au début du *De officiis*<sup>49</sup> : « il va à l'encontre du devoir que son étude détourne de la conduite des affaires », confirme, si besoin était, que la conviction profonde de la supériorité de la vie pratique sur la vie théorique ne l'a jamais véritablement quitté. En d'autres termes, il y a souvent eu chez Cicéron un jugement favorable à la vie théorique, mais la *voluntas* n'a jamais suivi, en particulier parce qu'en dernière instance, elle était chez lui déterminée beaucoup plus par un comportement mimétique à l'égard du *mos maiorum* et de ceux qui l'avaient incarné que par la prise en charge des conclusions de la raison.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ad fam.* 9.16.7.

<sup>49</sup> *De off.* 1.19.

SENECA AND THE *CONTEMPLATIO VERI*  
*DE OTIO* AND *EPISTULAE MORALES*

Margaret Graver

Seneca makes a formal case for the theoretical life in the fragmentary treatise titled *De otio*.<sup>1</sup> Leisure, a term with multiple connotations in Roman letters, here appears in the more specific sense of the σχολή needed for philosophical study; while *contemplatio* just as clearly fills the role of θεωρία as used in Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 10.7 and in many Hellenistic sources.<sup>2</sup> Though incomplete, the *De otio* is of considerable interest for the manner in which it combines standard themes of Stoic ethics with elements from the Platonist and Aristotelian tradition, setting these over against Epicurean quietism. Working from familiar Stoic axioms concerning the mutual responsibility of all rational beings and the naturalness of intelligent inquiry, Seneca presents what he believes to be a characteristically Stoic justification for a retired life devoted to philosophical pursuits. Not every such life is justified, he argues, but only that which confers real benefits—that is, benefits other than pleasure—on oneself and others. The study of cosmological and theological topics is important in that it elevates the mind above mundane concerns and brings it closer to the divine (a claim developed further in the *Naturales quaestiones*).<sup>3</sup> Yet even so, legitimate concerns may be raised about the demands philosophical study imposes upon a limited lifespan. The sheer expenditure of time required by philosophy demands some justification, and this he seeks to provide through a medley of arguments concerning the nature of the individual, the demands of circumstances, the need for personal moral improvement and the ethical benefits conferred through teaching.

The result is a rather puzzling treatment that leaves us with no clear conception of what the contemplative activity of philosophers actually

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<sup>1</sup> Text in Reynolds (1977); critical edition with commentary Dionigi (1983); edition with commentary Williams (2003). The title is known from the contents-list of the Codex Ambrosianus; see Williams (2003) 63–64.

<sup>2</sup> For the moral and political implications of *otium* in Roman culture see Grilli (1953); André (1966 and 1962a). Seneca touches on the topic more broadly in his dialogues *De brevitae vitae* and *De tranquillitate animi*.

<sup>3</sup> Especially in *Nat. quaest.* 3 *praef.* 10–18; 1 *praef.*; see Barnes (1997) 21–23; Inwood (2009).

consists in (astronomy? spiritual exercises? writing books?) and which of the philosopher's endeavors is supposed to impart value to the enterprise as a whole. The *De otio* takes on new meaning, however, when read in conjunction with Seneca's most comprehensive work, the *Epistulae morales*.<sup>4</sup> Close to *De otio* in date, the longer work shares many of its themes and arguments, and develops on a much larger scale its concern with the role of specifically philosophical activities in a virtuous life.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the *Epistulae morales* makes explicit a tension that is present without acknowledgement in *De otio*: the difference between philosophical study for the sake of personal moral development, to tame the passions and prepare oneself for courageous action, and theoretical activity for its own sake, simply to increase one's understanding of the world. Having argued at some length for the importance of a philosophical retirement in providing opportunity for self-improvement, Seneca recognizes that he is at odds with himself when he proceeds with the more abstract theoretical investigations in which he is also interested. To resolve the tension, he resorts to a series of rhetorical strategies calculated to win favor for the inclusion of technical material while preserving the epistolary decorum he has established.

In addition, the *Epistulae morales* do a good deal to flesh out the sparse indications given in *De otio* as to what Seneca understands of the nature of philosophical pursuits. Although we cannot treat the letters as straightforwardly autobiographical, we can learn much from them about how Seneca conceives of θεωρία from the sketches and descriptions he includes in the work. In particular, the figure of Claranus in *Ep.* 66 provides us with our best Neronian portrait of a theoretical philosopher. Through that portrait, as well as through the epistolographer's reports of his own activities and those of his addressee Lucilius, we glimpse a distinctively Senecan understanding of what the contemplative life should look like: a life of self-cultivation but also of abstract thought, filled with solitary reading and writing but also with long philosophical conversations.

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<sup>4</sup> Text in Reynolds (1965); some useful notes in Préchac (1945–1964); full commentary for many of the more philosophically interesting letters in Inwood (2007a).

<sup>5</sup> If the *De otio* is dedicated to L. Annaeus Serenus, then it must have been composed in or near 62, around the time the *Epistulae morales* were begun. Unfortunately, the dedication is attested only by a 'virtually illegible' notation in the Codex Ambrosianus. See Griffin (1976) 316–317, 399; Williams (2003) 12–13.

## I

Although the opening of *De otio* is truncated, not much can have been lost there, for as the extant portion begins Seneca is still making an initial statement of his view that it is morally beneficial to retire by oneself for philosophical study. A nameless interlocutor objects: how is this recommendation consistent with Seneca's professed commitment to Stoicism? For Stoics urge active public service up to the very moment of death (1.4). To defend his claim, Seneca might have appealed to the founders' own practice of philosophy as against their precepts. He feels, though, that the Stoic call to action is in fact fully consistent with devoting all one's time to the *contemplatio veritatis*, whether that be throughout one's working life or only for the years following a career in public service (2.1–2). As it turns out, only the arguments concerning the whole of one's working life are presented in the portion of the treatise we have, but since this is the stronger position, the apparent loss of arguments for the fallback position is of no great moment.

In contrast to the Epicurean *λάθε βιώσας*, which bars one from engaging in politics unless there is compelling reason to do so, the Stoic doctrine as Seneca knows it is that one should choose civic engagement unless there is some hindrance. In other words, the Epicureans favor retirement as a life-plan ('*ex proposito*'), the Stoics only under the pressure of circumstances ('*ex causa*'). But in fact there is a wide range of circumstances that may make public life unsupportable. First of all, the state may be too corrupt to benefit from one's services; second, one may not have sufficient power and influence to change the course of events; third, one may be hampered by ill health. If any of these conditions obtains, one may legitimately devote one's entire life to the *bonae artes*; that is, to philosophical studies (3.4).<sup>6</sup>

But these arguments for exemption from public service would hardly be convincing if Seneca did not also provide reasons for thinking that philosophical activity is valuable in itself. He needs to show that one who chooses the contemplative life can still fulfil the Stoics' moral requirement to benefit as many others as possible—in effect, that philosophy is an alternative form of public service. He takes up this challenge at first with the trivial assertion that even benefiting oneself alone will, in some situations, satisfy the moral requirement, for circumstances might make it impossible to do anything even for a few. He goes on to claim, more substantively, that by

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<sup>6</sup> For *bonae artes* in this sense, compare *Nat. quaest.* 6.32.1: 'non enim aliunde animo venit robur quam a bonis artibus, quam a contemplatione naturae'.

cultivating the inner life one may render oneself more fit to serve others at some time in the future (*De ot.* 3.5). Then, taking a different tack, he appeals to a broader understanding of the polity to which one belongs. Each of us is a member of two communities: the specific city into which we are born, such as Athens or Carthage, and the universe as a whole, which encompasses all human beings and also the gods. The studies we pursue in solitude are in effect a service to this second and larger community, for in them we benefit god by providing a witness to his activities. Finally, our studies provide a very great benefit to future generations whenever philosophical discoveries are recorded and transmitted. In this sense Zeno and Chrysippus can be credited with public service not merely to a single city but to all humanity (6.4–5).

In any case, it seems that philosophical study is required of us by the fundamental Stoic imperative that one should live in accordance with nature. For certain innate human tendencies can serve as evidence that contemplation is natural to us, just as action is. The universal love of narrative, of travel, and of solving puzzles and mysteries demonstrates that we are by nature a curious race, designed to study the universe in all its beauty and complexity (5.1–4). Even the very structure of our bodies, with our upright stature and flexible neck, is well adapted to observe the pageantry of the constellations, indicating that nature means us also to proceed to more abstract objects of contemplation: the generation and workings of the cosmos, the origin of souls, the continuous or particulate nature of matter, the intermingling of elements (5.5–6). Since the time that could productively be devoted to such studies exceeds the human lifespan, even an entire life devoted to them will be a life in accordance with nature (5.7).

Such studies bring pleasure, but one is not authorized to pursue them merely for that reason (6.1–2). The familiar debate about the lives of pleasure, of action, and of contemplation fails to recognize that each of these lives involves both of the others as adjuncts ('accessiones'). Just as contemplation is accompanied by pleasure, so also the lives devoted to pleasure and to moral action are not without some form of reflection (7.1–2). It does matter, certainly, whether one chooses contemplation as a life-plan ('propositum') or as an adjunct; still, it is worth noting that proponents of all three lives turn out to favor a very similar mix of activities. For Stoics, though, contemplation can only be a *statio*, never a *portus*: it is a harborage in stormy weather rather than a destination in itself (7.3–4).

Now concluding his argument in favor of lifelong contemplation, Seneca returns to the first of the reasons listed earlier to remain aloof from ordinary political action, namely that one's community may be too corrupt to benefit



from one's services. In fact, he says, this justification can be extended to cover all cases, for if one's standards are high enough, no state is ever such as to merit the philosopher's efforts at civic service, or to welcome them. Hence a life of leisure is always permissible, provided one's leisure is made to serve the public interest in some larger sense. Indeed the Chrysippean mandate can be understood to say that we should not only tolerate a life in retreat, but even choose that life (8.1). The supposed requirement to engage in the political life of existing cities turns out to be a kind of self-cancelling instruction, like urging someone to sail upon a sea where there are no storms (8.3).

For ease of reference in what follows, I now repeat the main arguments of *De otio* in list form; they are:

A. Negative arguments:

1. The state may be too corrupt to receive service (*corruption exemption*);
2. All states are too corrupt to receive service (*universal corruption exemption*);
3. The philosopher may lack power and influence (*weakness exemption*);
4. The philosopher may be in poor health (*chronic illness exemption*).

B. Positive arguments:

1. Philosophy benefits oneself, even if no one else (*justification by self-benefit*);
2. Philosophy benefits others through improvements in one's character (*justification by self-amelioration*);
3. Philosophy benefits a universal community by providing a witness to god's activities (*justification within the wider polity*);
4. Philosophy benefits future generations via the written word (*justification by written legacy*);
5. Both philosophy and action are natural to human beings (*naturalness justification*).

## II

Before addressing the difficulties of the *De otio* fragment, we should make what observations we can concerning its doctrinal background. On the face of things, Seneca's professed commitment is to Stoicism, and his report of this portion of Stoic doctrine is in fact corroborated at key points: the call to action 'unless there is hindrance' ('nisi si quid impediērit') by Diog. Laert.

7.121, citing Chrysippus ('the wise person will engage in politics if nothing prevents him'), and the naturalness of the theoretical urge by Diog. Laert. 7.130 ('the rational animal is begotten by nature suited for both contemplation and action'). But one may well be puzzled by some features of the discussion that recall Platonic, Aristotelian, and even Epicurean views: perhaps the real project is to harmonize several traditions? Such an interpretation would be difficult to support, however, because of the gaps in our knowledge of the Stoic tradition and in particular of the second and first century authors Seneca claims to have read. The interest in combining disparate traditions may have been theirs rather than his.

A fragment of Chrysippus quoted by Plutarch provides us with a parallel for Seneca's stated intention to provide a response to a charge of self-indulgence. Chrysippus leveled just such a charge against certain philosophers of his own period. For him, the pleasure one might gain from theoretical investigations is not sufficient justification for pursuing them.<sup>7</sup> This is just the view of the nameless interlocutor who challenges Seneca in *De ot.* 1.4, claiming that Stoic ethics demands a life of service to the common good. Unlike Chrysippus, however, Seneca represents this challenge as one that can conceivably be made against the Stoics' own practice of philosophy. Of course it is possible that Chrysippus himself raised the issue preliminary to a defense of the contemplative life on Stoic principles, but we have no evidence that this was his purpose. It may be Seneca himself who converts the attack upon other schools into a defense of his own.

His main line of argument will certainly be most effective with those who are already committed to Stoic principles. The 'wider polity' argument of *De ot.* 4.1–2 draws upon a familiar Chrysippian conception of the universal city to which all rational beings belong.<sup>8</sup> The existence of the wider polity enables activities pursued in retreat from one's immediate polity to be construed as an alternative form of service. The moral requirement then applies equally to both forms of service, and the selection between them can be made on the basis of circumstances.<sup>9</sup> It thus becomes important that the theoretical life is a life in accordance with human nature, so that it has

<sup>7</sup> Plut. *De Stoic. rep.* 1033D. For Chrysippus' position see Bénatouïl (2007) 1–13; also relevant is Griffin (1976) 340.

<sup>8</sup> The cosmos meets the definition of a city because it is 'a number of persons dwelling in one place governed by law' (Dion. Chrys. 36.20 [LS 67J]); see further Schofield (1991) 57–92.

<sup>9</sup> *De ot.* 8.1: 'e lege Chrysippi vivere otiose licet: non dico ut otium patiat, sed ut eligat'. For selection (ἐκλογή) and selective value elsewhere in Stoicism see Stob. *Anth.* 2.7.7g (= *SVF* 3.128); Cic. *De fin.* 3.20; Diog. Laert. 7.88.

what Stoics call selective value. One may choose it in the same way that the Stoics' wise person might choose virtuous walking over virtuous sitting.

Also characteristically Stoic is the manner in which Seneca establishes the naturalness justification via an appeal to the innate curiosity of the human species. Arguments derived from supposed innate tendencies of human beings were used by more than one school, but the appeal in *De ot.* 5.2 to a universal love of problem-solving for its own sake bears a striking resemblance to that of Cicero's Stoic spokesman in *De fin.* 3.17–18.<sup>10</sup> Finally, it is a characteristically Stoic move to dismiss the pleasures of contemplation as a mere 'adjunct' ('accessio') of the main activity. The thought matches closely with the role Chrysippus is said to have assigned to pleasure generally: it is not a good in its own right, but rather a concomitant (ἐπιγέννημα) of virtuous activity.<sup>11</sup> Seneca shows familiarity with this Stoic claim also in several passages of *De vita beata*, speaking of the delight that arises from cognizing what is true ('ex cognitione veri', *De vita* 4.5) and from virtuous action: pleasure 'comes in' ('supervenit') as an adjunct, like wildflowers that spring up unbidden when one cultivates a field for grain (*De vita* 9.1–2; cf. 15.1–2).

The rejection of pleasure as a motivation is consistent with Seneca's usual hostility toward the hedonist foundation of Epicurean ethics. The challenge expressed in *De ot.* 1 was specifically to differentiate Stoic contemplation from the Epicurean λάθρε βιώσας. To be sure, his description of how the study of nature 'bursts through the barriers of heaven' ('caeli munimenta perrumpit', *De ot.* 5.6) bears a striking resemblance to Lucretius' description of Epicurus as the one who 'wished to break out of the tight enclosures of nature's gates' and whose mind 'advanced far beyond the flaming bulwarks of the sky'.<sup>12</sup> But the similarity (which may in any case be accidental) hardly connotes any receptivity to Epicurean ethics or to the reasons put forth by that school for preferring a retired life. At least some of the reasons Seneca offers on his own account are sharply at odds with Epicurean thought; above all, his appeal to the wider polity constitutes a rejection of Epicurean conventionalism.

<sup>10</sup> Compare the specific points made in *De ot.* 5.2 with Cicero's appeal to young children being delighted when they find something out even when it brings no further reward. Seneca's argument is closer to *De fin.* 3.17 than it is to the Peripatetic argument from innate tendencies in *De fin.* 4.18.

<sup>11</sup> Diog. Laert. 7.86.

<sup>12</sup> Lucr. 1.70–73: 'effringere ut arta / naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret [...] vis animi pervicit et extra / processit longe flammantia moenia mundi'. The parallel is noted in both Dionigi (1983) 242–243 and Williams (2003) 95. Seneca had read Lucretius; note esp. *Ep.* 95.11. Concerning his complex attitude toward Epicureanism see Graver (forthcoming).

The tendency toward doctrinalism is not mitigated in the least by the talk of harmonization at *De ot.* 7.1–4.<sup>13</sup> There is certainly a general resemblance among the modes of life favored by each of the schools, and Seneca will derive what rhetorical advantage he can from this. But his own remarks about the crucial distinction between life-aim ('propositum') and adjunct ('accessio') undermine the coalition he is offering to build. And his overtures to the rival schools are not very convincing. His report on the role of reflection in Epicureanism, though well-grounded in Epicurus' own statements, does not credit the school with any real scientific interests, and the wording is tinged with contempt: the school is a 'voluptuary sect' and its motive for rational thought is 'to make pleasure secure for itself' (7.2). Of the third party to the discussion, those who advocate contemplation for its own sake, the paragraph says nothing specific, only that some people do this ('alii petunt eam', 7.2). One gets the impression that these scarcely identifiable *alii* have no arguments to offer in support of their view and are included merely for the sake of symmetry. What emerges from the paragraph is the distinctiveness of the Stoic view, the one that is committed to moral action in its own right.

All the same, there are some features of Seneca's own professedly Stoic argument that look to be of Platonist and/or Aristotelian derivation. The strongest of the Stoics' exemption claims, that there is no government which can tolerate a philosopher or which a philosopher can tolerate, would seem to derive from the sixth book of Plato's *Republic*. There Socrates answers the charge that philosophers are useless to their cities by pointing out that existing cities are invariably hostile to philosophers' efforts to improve them (487c–d). In general, human communities are so much given over to lawlessness that philosophers will reasonably prefer to keep to themselves (496c–d). So also with the exemption for those with chronic illness. The same portion of the *Republic* has Socrates remark that the only people who will be able to remain free of corruption are those philosophical natures who are exempt from public service by reason of exile, provincial origin, or what he calls the 'bridle of our friend Theages'—that is, chronic bodily illness (496c). Seneca's remarks about viewing the constellations in *De ot.* 5.4 are also reminiscent of the *Republic*, of the released cave-dweller who progresses to more and more exalted sights, and of the viewing of the exterior Forms within the central myth of the *Phaedrus*. Even the

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<sup>13</sup> Griffin (1976) rightly contests the reading of this passage by André (1962a) as favoring the 'mixed' life.

observations about our upright stature and flexible necks recall the analysis of the human body in *Timaeus* 47a–b and 90a–d. The theme concerning the pleasures of contemplation is most familiar to us from Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* 10.7, where one reason θεωρία is the ultimate good is that it yields exceptionally pure and stable pleasures. Cicero knows the pleasures of contemplation as an Antiochean or ‘old Academic’ trademark.<sup>14</sup>

Given these strong Platonic and Aristotelian associations it is very striking that Seneca treats these lines of argument as part of the Stoic position; he does not cede them to the advocate of the contemplative life pure and simple (‘ille qui contemplationi inservit’, *De ot.* 7.1). To explain this, either we must accept that Seneca deliberately conflates his Stoic view with those of its rivals in this area, or we must posit that the features we associate with Plato and Aristotle had already been taken up by Seneca’s Stoic predecessors, so that he does not regard them as belonging to the opposition. Considering the strong doctrinal bias of some portions of the treatise, the second option is preferable. The intervening history is very long, with many Stoic authors working through the same issues in dialogue with Academics and Peripatetics of various kinds.<sup>15</sup> Plato’s works were the shared heritage of all these philosophers, and points made in support of one position could easily be co-opted and reinterpreted to favor an opposite view. Seneca’s familiarity with Stoic works from this period was fairly detailed, better than ours at any rate. He appears to have studied a work by Panaetius on the ‘contemplative’ and ‘active’ parts of philosophy,<sup>16</sup> and he also knows some works of Posidonius, who took θεωρία in the sense of ‘observing the order of the

<sup>14</sup> Cic. *Luc.* 127: ‘indagatio ipsa rerum cum maximarum tum etiam occultissimarum habet oblectationem; si vero aliquid occurrit quod veri simile videatur, humanissima completur animus voluptate’. See Dionigi (1983) 92–95; Bénatouïl (2007) 13–21 and (2009) 11–24.

<sup>15</sup> A minor but interesting indication of the prior history of the discussion may be gleaned from the two references to Carthage, alongside Athens, as a city in which philosophers might live (4.1, 8.2). This has been thought puzzling: if a Neronian author is casting about for examples of Mediterranean cities, long-destroyed Carthage ought not to be the second example that comes to mind. (Williams [2003], 14–15 rightly contests the suggestion by Dionigi (1983) 103–104, 275–276 that Rome is meant.) That city does, however, have a profile in the Hellenistic Academy as the home city of Clitomachus, also known as Hasdrubal, a pupil of Carneades and later head of the Academy (Diog. Laert. 4.67; Cic. *De or.* 1.45; *Tusc. Disp.* 3.54). If the arguments Seneca presents have their prior history in dialectical exchange between Stoics and Academics in the third and second centuries, Carthage might indeed be a natural example to mention of cities not conducive to public service by philosophers.

<sup>16</sup> Compare *Ep.* 94.45 with Diog. Laert. 7.92 and Cic. *De off.* 1.15–17; and see Griffin (1976) 340.

cosmos' into his definition of the ethical end.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, he quotes from a work by Athenodorus of Tarsus which argued in favor of philosophical retirement on the basis of a Platonic-sounding claim about the corruption of all governments.<sup>18</sup> Rather than crediting what look like Platonist elements in his own view to some unannounced program of eclecticism, we should accept his representation of all the major elements in the work as having come to him from Stoic sources—even if the real provenance of some of them is considerably more complicated.<sup>19</sup>

### III

I take it as given, then, that the arguments Seneca presents in *De otio* are intended by him to be Stoic arguments defending his own contemplative activity and that of his Stoic forebears. With that said, though, serious questions remain about the nature and content of the theoretical activity Seneca has in mind. If contemplation is permissible on Stoic principles, then what is it that one is permitted to contemplate, and how does one go about contemplating it? Does contemplation need to reach any conclusions, and if it does, are these to be conveyed to anyone besides the philosopher himself? How, if at all, do the specifically moral benefits that accrue to the philosopher extend to others? On these points the *De otio* yields confusing and contradictory answers.

At first, it appears as if the retirement Seneca recommends has only one purpose: to improve one's functioning as a moral agent. Retreat will be beneficial ('proderit') and conducive to psychic health ('salutare') because it will make us 'better people' ('meliores'), enabling us to live in single-minded and consistent way ('aequali et uno tenore', 1.1). This language precedes the introduction of Stoic material, but it is continued later at *De ot.* 3.5,

<sup>17</sup> Posid. fr. 186 EK, 13–15: τὸ ζῆν θεωροῦντα τὴν τῶν ὄλων ἀλήθειαν καὶ τάξιν καὶ συγκατασκευάζοντα αὐτὴν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν. See further Kidd (1988) 2, 672–673, with Bénatouïl (2009) 9–11.

<sup>18</sup> Athenodorus' claim is reported by Seneca in *De tranq. an.* 3.2: "Sed quia in hac" inquit "tam insana hominum ambitione tot calumniatoribus in deterius recta torquentibus parum tuta simplicitas est et plus futurum semper est quod obstat quam quod succedat, a foro quidem et publico recedendum est". Seneca himself rejects the position in the following paragraph, claiming that at least for some temperaments it is best to serve the immediate community however one can. His view there may be derived from Panaetius: see Griffin (1976) 324–327.

<sup>19</sup> For an assessment of the problematic notion of eclecticism in ancient philosophy, with a helpful perspective on Seneca in particular, see Donini (1988).

where it also grounds an important justificatory argument: that improving one's own character counts as doing the business of the community. If the treatise went no further than this, we might be inclined to conclude that typical 'contemplative' activities would be reading treatises on morals and performing spiritual exercises based on them,<sup>20</sup> perhaps coupled with the same kinds of self-examination and self-admonishment Seneca usually recommends for those seeking moral progress.

With the introduction of the wider polity, however, the scope of contemplation broadens. Ethics is still at the fore, but the concern now seems to be about ethical theory rather than about one's own disposition to ethical behavior: topics for contemplation begin with 'what virtue is, whether there is one virtue or many, whether it is nature or craft that makes men good' (4.2). The same passage also mentions additional objects of study: whether there is one physical world or many, whether matter is continuous or interspersed with void; where god dwells and whether he manages the world or only observes its workings; whether the world is eternal. The contemplative procedure seems to be different here as well, a matter of pondering and seeking to understand, for it is here that Seneca seeks to justify theoretical activity as a way to provide god with a witness for his work (4.2). Similarly in *De ot.* 5.4–6, one is to observe the things Nature has designed us to observe, the list of which begins with the parade of constellations and then proceeds to more abstract topics in physics and cosmology: the origin and structure of the universe and the human soul, the elements, and the like. The model for contemplation is direct astronomical observation; one is to be an 'admirator naturae' (5.8). In this second list there is no mention even of ethical theory.

Yet in the following paragraph the role of practical ethics is again central. Turning 'from things human to things divine' involves both 'the love of the virtues' and 'the cultivation of the intellect' ('sine ullo virtutum amore et sine cultu ingeni', 6.2). The relation between *otium* and political engagement is that between virtue as a capacity and virtue in action; again, it is that between 'thinking what one ought to do' and 'bringing what one has practiced to fruition' ('quid faciendum sit cogitare [...] ea quae meditata est ad verum perducere', 6.2). The language here suggests that the operative procedures for contemplation are deliberation concerning prospective actions

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<sup>20</sup> Reading is indicated by the expression 'secedere ad optimos viros' in 1.1. The expression is correctly interpreted by Williams (2003) 64 from parallels in the *De brevitate vitae*; but the theme is a favorite one in Seneca; see for instance *Ep.* 39.2, with Graver (forthcoming).

and spiritual exercises steeling oneself to carry them out. Seneca even goes so far as to say that a virtuous life spent entirely in contemplation would be an 'incomplete and listless good' ('inperfectum ac languidum bonum'). To give point to the exercise, one must show what one has learned ('id quod didicit ostendens').

This 'showing' might consist in someday acting upon what one has learned; this again would be justification by self-amelioration. Or, as the following paragraph suggests, it might consist in leaving something for posterity (a philosophical legacy), either through oral transmission or through the medium of writing.<sup>21</sup> But again, the actual content of the requisite legacy is not specified. Is one's leisure defensible if one has discovered a new planet? A new sort of syllogism? Or would it be necessary to have discovered what virtue is—and in that case, can more than one person leave such a legacy? We can see that the work of the theoretical philosopher ought to be other-directed in some sense, but without further specification, it remains quite unclear how the justification is supposed to work.

Especially puzzling is the relation between contemplative philosophy and improvement in one's own moral character. Much is made of this in *De ot.* 1, 3.5, and 6; at these points it seems as if the argument from self-amelioration is in fact the primary justification for the life of study. But we can hardly suppose that the philosophical legacy of Zeno and Chrysippus consists only in their personal moral improvement. To render the dialogue coherent, we would need to assume at least that discoveries in ethical theory contribute to practical moral functioning.<sup>22</sup> Theology and physics could perhaps be got on board by similar means, on grounds that they alter our disposition as agents by putting trivial objects of pursuit into a larger perspective. The tenor of *De ot.* 4–5, however, is surely against Seneca's putting those studies merely in a supporting role.

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<sup>21</sup> *De ot.* 6.3–4: 'Nos certe sumus qui dicimus et Zenonem et Chrysippum maiora egisse quam si duxissent exercitus, gessissent honores, leges tulissent; quas non uni civitati, sed toti humano generi tulerunt. Quid est ergo quare tale otium non conveniat viro bono, per quod futura saecula ordinet nec apud paucos contionetur sed apud omnis omnium gentium homines, quique sunt quique erunt?'. Compare the Vestal Virgins of 2.2: 'cum didicerunt docent'.

<sup>22</sup> An assumption Seneca sometimes makes, notably at *Ep.* 71.2–4.



## IV

Would the continuation of *De otio* have resolved these problems for us if it had survived? I doubt it, for the authorial voice of the portion we have never acknowledges that such difficulties exist. Matters are quite different, though, when we track the subsequent career of these same arguments within the *Epistulae morales*. In that work, which is itself much concerned with the question of philosophical retirement,<sup>23</sup> Seneca often revisits the themes and even the specific phrases of the *De otio* fragment, adapting them to suit the context. But furthermore, he regularly shows awareness of the lack of fit between the justification via self-amelioration and some of the most characteristic pursuits of the contemplative philosopher. Although he does not in fact refrain from purely theoretical inquiries and even expresses some enthusiasm for them,<sup>24</sup> his premise throughout is that philosophy aims at moral progress and the eventual attainment of the *vita beata*. The challenge for him is to use his rhetorical talent to find ways of mitigating the tension between *sui causa* reflection and the ethical objectives he has established for the work.

A general similarity of situation links the first book of *Epistulae morales* with *De otio*. As the work opens, we find Seneca urging his correspondent Lucilius to follow his example and withdraw from public service in order to devote all his time to philosophical studies. Lucilius is to read the moralists (*Ep.* 2, 6.4–5) and to select a model of life from their writings (*Ep.* 11.8–10), just as the addressee of *De otio* was urged to do (*De ot.* 1.1). Seneca's own life, as represented within his work, will serve as his exemplum of a philosophic retirement during old age; the somewhat younger Lucilius will be the point of identification for any reader who is considering a whole-life retirement.

The connection between the two works is especially evident in the eighth Epistle. At the beginning of that letter, Lucilius is made to voice the very same complaint that began *De otio*: how can a Stoic moralist urge him to retreat from public service? What about the school's precepts that bid one

<sup>23</sup> The topic is addressed directly in *Epp.* 1, 8, 19, 20, 22, 32, 43, and 68. André (1962b) gives a resumé of relevant passages.

<sup>24</sup> Notably at *Ep.* 95.10: 'Philosophia autem et contemplativa est et activa: spectat simul agitque. Erras enim si tibi illam putas tantum terrestres operas promittere: altius spirat. "Totum" inquit "mundum scrutor nec me intra contubernium mortale contineo, suadere vobis aut dissuadere contenta: magna me vocant supraque vos posita"'. Similar are *Epp.* 78.26, 89.1, 93.8–10. On cosmology in the letters see Inwood (2009) 216–222.

remain active until death ('in actu mori')? In reply, Seneca rehearses several of the specific points made in the fragmentary treatise. The life that he recommends, which is also the life he himself leads, is just an alternative form of moral action, he says, for by writing on Stoic ethics he is providing benefits to future generations.

Well, do you think this is inaction that I am urging upon you? Here is the reason I have hidden myself away and closed the doors: to benefit the greater number [...] I have withdrawn not only from society but from business, especially from my own business: the work that I am doing is for posterity. It is they who can benefit from the things I write.<sup>25</sup>

Like Zeno and Chrysippus in *De otio* 6.4–5, Seneca as philosophical author does more for humanity than he could by legal advocacy and other forms of public service. 'Believe me, those who appear to be doing nothing are doing things that are greater—they are dealing with matters both human and divine' (*Ep.* 8.6).

Yet these 'matters human and divine' are not as wide-ranging as they sound. In contrast to the miscellany of topics recommended for study and contemplation in *De otio*, the suggestion of eighth letter seems to be that one should devote oneself exclusively to ethics—and not ethical theory, either, but a steady diet of self-amelioration. Seneca himself has withdrawn from business only so that he can deliver 'healthful admonitions' which will enable his readers to amend their lives. These admonitions will be like recipes for medicaments which he has tried out on his own 'sores'; that is, they are methods of promoting healthy agency in oneself, written out by one who has made some moral progress with them. Seneca even provides a sample of the kind of discourse his *otium* is producing: a straightforward sermon on the dangers of vice, the advantages of asceticism, and the superfluity of wealth.

This is not quite the same as the 'written legacy' justification of *De ot.* 6.4–5. It is rather a combination of that argument with the self-amelioration argument.<sup>26</sup> As in *De ot.* 3.5, Seneca has been making himself a better agent, but the value of that enterprise is now not limited to his own lifetime.

<sup>25</sup> *De ot.* 8.1–2: 'Quid? ego tibi videor inertiam suadere? In hoc me recondidi et fores clusi, ut prodesse pluribus possem [...] Secessi non tantum ab hominibus sed a rebus, et in primis a meis rebus: posterorum negotium ago. Illis aliqua quae possint prodesse conscribo'.

<sup>26</sup> Seneca's position resembles that of Athenodorus as reported in *De tranq. an.* 3.1–8, in that Athenodorus also insists that a life of retirement can benefit humankind by teaching ethics by speech or writing ('ingenio'). But the idea of writing out remedies that have been found efficacious in one's own case is not found in the *De tranq. an.* passage.

The medium of writing enables him to pass on to future agents whatever therapeutic expedients he finds most efficacious on an empirical basis. Both parts of the argument are strengthened by being combined, for an elderly philosopher might not have much opportunity to act again in the world, and a philosophical legacy that consisted only of unjustified studies would not become justified merely by the transmission. At the same time, this is a very limited form of justification. It does nothing to support spending one's time on abstract topics in physics and cosmology. Even the finer points of ethical theory might not be a defensible topic of study.

Indeed, the first sequence of epistles, with its emphasis on using one's time productively for the purposes of self-amelioration, would seem to make matters rather worse for anyone who wishes to devote long stretches of time to the concentrated study of an abstract subject. And in fact the Seneca of the *Epistulae morales* does have a general policy of avoiding any very sophisticated discussion. While most of the letters have some philosophical point to make, there is typically very little development, far less than Seneca is capable of, and the topics chosen are supposed to be maximally relevant to those immersed in the business of living. It is not that technical material is excluded altogether. The prevailing tendency of the collection does not prevent Seneca from devoting a number of pages to more technical inquiries, not only in Platonic ontology (*Ep.* 58) and the classification of causes (*Ep.* 65) but also in moral theory (e.g. *Ep.* 71, *Ep.* 94–95), Stoic metaphysics (*Ep.* 106, *Ep.* 117) and even logic (*Ep.* 87). But such material is present on sufferance, as it were. The epistolographer allows himself to include it, but in most cases he also draws attention to his own breach of decorum. In so doing he preserves the justification he has established for the project as a whole, but leaves the more technical material outside the umbrella.

A favorite Senecan device for negotiating the tension between his stated objectives for the *Epistles* and his forays into more sophisticated philosophy is what Brad Inwood calls the 'pragmatic break.'<sup>27</sup> Some more abstruse reflection will be cut short with an apology, as if the epistolographer had merely digressed from some intended disquisition on practical ethics. In the 58th Epistle, for instance, a fascinating discussion of Platonic ontology is interrupted after only six pages, at which point Seneca verbally smacks his brow:

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<sup>27</sup> Inwood (2007a) 131.

'What have I to gain,' you say, 'from these fine distinctions ('subtilitas') of yours?' Nothing, if you ask me. But just as the engraver, tired from a long period of close work, turns his eyes away to rest and, as we say, to 'pasture' them, so should we sometimes relax our minds and refresh them with some amusement.<sup>28</sup>

As a rule, the pragmatic break is followed immediately by a return to therapeutic ethics, often by drawing some unanticipated and quite tangential moral out of what has been said. In the 58th letter, the sequence is more elaborate: the return to practical ethics is preceded by a justification of a different sort, with theoretical studies providing a sort of refreshment for the mind. But even without this enthusiastic addition, an astute reader will hardly be inclined to take the pragmatic break for an admission of genuine regret. If anything, there is a touch of ostentation. Despite the show of disciplining himself to spend time on practicalities, the author of the *Epistles* does not want anyone to miss the fact that his real philosophical retreat is an intellectually sophisticated one.<sup>29</sup> Roman readers, accustomed to such rhetorical gestures as the orator's *praeteritio* and the *recusatio* of the Augustan poets, could be expected to get the point.

Another convenient ploy is to assign responsibility for the material in question to someone other than the author. The rhetoric may even be quite harsh, as it is in a string of letters in Book 5, where Seneca's boisterous objections to the excessive subtlety of Stoic logicians do not hinder him from quoting their favorite conundrums in full.<sup>30</sup> With greater tolerance, some letters late in the extant collection represent the theoretical question as an inquiry submitted by Lucilius in one of the intervening letters. Seneca will answer his correspondent's question, but reluctantly, with a certain amount of proleptic scolding.

Your desire is that I write down for you my view on the following question, which is bandied about within our school: whether justice, courage, foresight and the other virtues are animate beings. My dear Lucilius, it is by such

<sup>28</sup> *Ep.* 58.25: "Quid ista" inquis "mihi subtilitas proderit?" Si me interrogas, nihil; sed quemadmodum ille caelator oculos diu intentos ac fatigatos remittit atque advocat et, ut dici solet, pascit, sic nos animum aliquando debemus relaxare et quibusdam oblectamentis reficere'. Additional examples include *Ep.* 65.13 (quoted below), 106.1–12; 113.21–22. For the metaphor compare Antiochus in *Cic. Luc.* 127 'animorum ingeniorumque naturale quoddam quasi pabulum'.

<sup>29</sup> Inwood (2007a) 263: 'we should perhaps see Seneca's apologetic introduction of technicality not as a betrayal of his own principles but rather as an attempt to extend technical philosophy into an otherwise inhospitable genre; that is, far from indicating his distaste for technicality it would be a mark of his enthusiasm for it'.

<sup>30</sup> *Epp.* 45, 48, 49; see Barnes (1997).

sophistry ('subtilitate') that we have made ourselves seem to be exercising our ingenuity on useless endeavors and wasting our leisure with discussions that bring no benefit.<sup>31</sup>

The ambiguous term *subtilitas* links these latter devices to the 'pragmatic break' of *Ep.* 58.25 and related passages. *Subtilitas*, 'subtlety, precision,' can refer either to a quality of discussions or to an argument itself. Seneca uses it with disapprobation, even scorn, when his point is that more time has been spent on an inquiry than is morally justifiable: it is 'your fancy syllogism' ('subtilissima collectio', *Ep.* 45.8); 'those splitters of hairs' ('istis subtilibus', *Ep.* 48.4); 'pointless pathways of scholarly sophistication' ('hanc subtilitatem inutilem', *Ep.* 65.16). But the word is neutral in itself, and its connotations can be reversed. In *Ep.* 58.20, just before the passage quoted above, Seneca remarks that it is Plato who is responsible for the difficulty of the discussion there. 'Nulla est autem sine difficultate subtilitas', he says: 'without difficulty there is no fineness of distinction'—as if *subtilitas* were a desirable quality well worth the effort needed to achieve it.<sup>32</sup> In all cases, the term picks out the technical studies of the committed philosopher, whether in logic or in other theoretical studies, and in all cases it makes the point that these studies demand both time and energy. If there is a shift of valence, it is because that expenditure of time is sometimes regarded as justified and sometimes not.

## V

The unprecedented discursive format which Seneca has devised in the *Epistulae morales* provides him with another means of expression as well. Often the most telling indications of his attitude toward theoretical philosophy are to be found in the representational elements of the letters: literary portraiture, including self-portraiture, and bits of narrative that reveal how Seneca and his close associates spend their time in retreat. For although these elements must have been modeled on Seneca's real experience (so that the self-portrait could be recognizable and believable in its own time),

<sup>31</sup> *Ep.* 113.1: 'Desideras tibi scribi a me quid sentiam de hac quaestione iactata apud nostros, an iustitia, fortitudo, prudentia ceteraeque virtutes animalia sint. Hac subtilitate effecimus, Lucili carissime, ut exercere ingenium inter inrita videremur et disputationibus nihil profuturis otium terere'. Compare *Epp.* 102.3–4; 108.1–2; 109.17, all connected by Seneca with the promised *liber moralis philosophiae* (see note 44); also *Epp.* 121.1; 124.1.

<sup>32</sup> Compare e.g. *Epp.* 65.14, 91.17, 95.61. The comments of Scarpata (1965) 157–189 are apposite here.

they are still fictive elements, selected and shaped to work effectively and to display to the reading public the images Seneca as author wants them to see. That is, Seneca's self-portraiture is more akin to the carefully crafted self-representation of Cicero in his philosophical dialogues than to the topical details included in Cicero's private correspondence. The same is true of the way Lucilius is represented and ventriloquized and of the cameo roles assigned to others of Seneca's acquaintances.

This way of reading the letters is essential to our inquiry here for two reasons. The first has to do with the dangerous political setting in which Seneca had to operate. Because choices he makes in the letters could well incur political repercussions for himself and his friends, it was in his interest to craft his representations of the lives of philosophers in such a way as to avoid anything that might draw hostile attention. The point has been well treated by Miriam Griffin as concerns Seneca's efforts to combat the impression that philosophers typically withdraw from public service because disgusted with the corruption of existing states.<sup>33</sup> Even if Seneca believes in the 'corrupt state' exemption from *De otio*, it would hardly have been expedient to press that case in a work with strong autobiographical elements. Chronic illness, even feigned illness, was a safer form of exemption in Nero's Rome. Even beyond the political concern, however, the manner in which Seneca chooses to represent himself and others is worth attending to for what it reveals to us about his conception of the theoretical life. Seneca may or may not have practiced philosophy in just the way he describes in the letters, but whether or not he did, his representations still make clear to us what he thinks theoretical philosophy normally entails and how it is supposed to be beneficial.

Relevant material could be supplied from many points in the collection, but the most interesting examples are to be found in a consecutive series of letters in Book 7, comprising letters 64, 65, 66, 67, and 68. In these, if I read the evidence right, Seneca is on the brink of committing himself openly to the contemplative life on Platonist-Aristotelian lines—but then pulls back, reasserting the programmatic 'written legacy' justification of *Ep.* 8 as the model for the correspondence. We can read this movement in the representational elements Seneca uses in each of these epistles; that is, in the brief notice of a day's events that frames and interacts with the reflective portion of each letter.

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<sup>33</sup> Griffin (1976) 360–366. Griffin holds that the statement of this very view in *De ot.* 8.1 is not endorsed by Seneca. I disagree, but her case is still very persuasive as concerns the *Epistulae Morales*.

In the 64th letter, Seneca recounts how Lucilius has been in his thoughts when receiving an evening visit from friends. After dinner and a wide-ranging conversation, everyone listens to a reading from the moralist Quintus Sextius. Seneca describes the effect of the reading on him. He has been fired with enthusiasm for moral action and is eager for opportunities to act courageously; moreover, he is struck with wonder at the achievements of philosophy itself.

For me, at least, the very thought of wisdom absorbs much of my time. I am no less astonished when I gaze upon it than I am sometimes by the heavens themselves, which I often see as if for the first time. For that reason I hold in awe both the discoveries of philosophy and those who have made those discoveries, and I thrill to claim what is, as it were, an inheritance from many predecessors. Everything they collected, everything they labored over, was for me!<sup>34</sup>

He then expresses a determination to augment the philosophical heritage with discoveries of his own. It is a renewed version of the written legacy justification as we saw it in *Ep.* 8 and in *De ot.* 6.4–5, but in a more exalted vein, with imagery borrowed from the viewing of the stars as in *De ot.* 5.4.

The 65th letter continues and develops the imagery even as it offers a rather different form of justification. Seneca is ill for an entire morning, but in the afternoon is able to read for a while and then, progressing, to do some unusually intense writing. He is then interrupted by friends who struck up a conversation on the classification of causes, a report of which occupies the bulk of the letter. When challenged by Lucilius to explain the attraction of ‘frittering away your time on these matters which do not eliminate any of your passions nor drive out any desires’ (65.15), Seneca explains in unmistakably Platonic language that discussions of this kind are beneficial to the spirit. As long as they are not carried to extremes, they uplift the mind, which is otherwise always longing to escape the shackles and weight of the body and return to its place of origin. He continues with a more original analogy:

Just as craftsmen, when they are engaged in some intricate task that strains the eyes and the light is indirect and poor, come out into the open and visit some place devoted to public recreation, there to refresh their eyes with the free light of day; even so does the mind, shut away in this somber dark apartment, emerge whenever it can into the open and relax in the

<sup>34</sup> *Ep.* 64.6–7: ‘Mihi certe multum auferre temporis solet contemplatio ipsa sapientiae; non aliter illam intueor obstupefactus quam ipsum interim mundum, quem saepe tamquam spectator novus video. Veneror itaque inventa sapientiae inventoresque; adire tamquam multorum hereditatem iuvat. Mihi ista adquisita, mihi laborata sunt’.

contemplation of the universe. The wise person, and likewise the seeker after wisdom, abides indeed within his body, yet with his better part is absent, turning his thoughts to things above.<sup>35</sup>

This beautiful image calls to mind Plato's Cave analogy from the *Republic*,<sup>36</sup> yet takes it in a different direction in keeping with Seneca's own objectives. Here, theoretical philosophy is essentially a respite, a means of refreshment for the mind when it is exhausted with more productive but less enjoyable endeavors. The body in the analogy is the poorly lit room in which the mind is constrained to work. But the 'intricate task' itself can only be the productive work the putative Lucilius has just complained Seneca is neglecting—that is, the schooling of emotion and desire, the usual business of the *Moral Epistles*. Rather than representing personal moral development as itself a form of theoretical philosophy, Seneca here treats the therapeutic endeavor as a necessary but fatiguing task and philosophy as something quite different, a set of abstract and essentially impractical studies which assist ethical therapy mainly by providing a respite from it.

Bodily illness figures prominently also in Seneca's portrait of Claranus at the beginning of the 66th Epistle. Claranus is introduced as an old school-mate of Seneca's and hence must be of about the same age. But Claranus has not had Seneca's opportunities to pursue a life of advocacy in the courts and to work his way up the *cursus honorum*; instead, his circumstances have imposed a life of seclusion. From the opening paragraph we learn that Claranus is physically misshapen and severely stooped ('deformi humilique corpusculo', 66.3) and that his condition is not merely in consequence of his age but has been with him since birth ('tales natura generare [...] quosdam enim edit corporibus inpeditos'). The portrait is of one with some very noticeable congenital defect; perhaps involving spasticity or paralysis, since he is hampered in his movements ('impeditus') as well as misshapen ('deformis'). Yet his mind is unimpaired: it shows through the body as a demonstration of the independence of ethical and intellectual characteristics from the physical.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Ep.* 65.17–18: 'Quemadmodum artifices [ex] alicuius rei subtilioris quae intentione oculos defetigat, si malignum habent et precarium lumen, in publicum prodeunt et in aliqua regione ad populi otium dedicata oculos libera luce delectant, sic animus in hoc tristi et obscuro domicilio clusus, quotiens potest, apertum petit et in rerum naturae contemplatione requiescit. Sapiens adsectatorque sapientiae adhaeret quidem in corpore suo, sed optima sui parte abest et cogitationes suas ad sublimia intendit'. Compare *Ep.* 58.25 (above, note 28).

<sup>36</sup> As noted by Lowenstam (1998) 70–71. For Seneca's management of Platonism in the passage see Sedley (2005) 137–138; Inwood (2005) 314–318.

<sup>37</sup> *Ep.* 66.3: 'Claranus mihi videtur in exemplar editus, ut scire possemus non deformitate



To this physically debilitated but intellectually powerful Claranus is assigned, notionally at any rate, the philosophical content of one of Seneca's most ambitious letters. Seneca and Claranus have spent several days together and have had multiple conversations on those days; these are to be recorded and sent to Lucilius. The present letter is to treat a technical point in Stoic axiology: how a certain classification of goods can be reconciled with the Stoic postulate on the equality of values.<sup>38</sup> This, we are told, was 'the topic investigated on the first day'—as if the two of them had been the discussants in the first book of some Ciceronian treatise (66.5). And it has indeed been a lengthy conversation, for the letter itself extends without apology to thirteen pages, longer by far than any letter Seneca has yet written and the third longest in the collection.<sup>39</sup> We are here in the realm of dedicated, unhurried philosophical discussion, more meticulous and sustained than the quick summaries of Platonic and Aristotelian doctrine offered in *Ep.* 58 and 65. Claranus and Seneca will work together to solve a particular problem in ethical theory, and they will devote whatever time that discussion requires.

There can be no doubt that the unusually rarefied content of *Ep.* 66 is to be associated with the character given to its interlocutor. Claranus' illness provides the excuse for developing that content via the chronic illness exemption: with his physical impairment, he could not have served as a Roman magistrate and so cannot be faulted for devoting his time to philosophical studies. More important, though, is the transformation this extended practice of thinking and discussion has worked upon his character, and at the same time on Seneca's way of perceiving his character:

Certainly I have begun to see our friend Claranus in a new way. He seems quite handsome to me, and as upright in stature as he is in spirit. A great man may come out of a hovel; a great and handsome mind from a lowly and misshapen body.<sup>40</sup>

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corporis foedari animum, sed pulchritudine animi corpus ornari'. The thought is more in accordance with Plato, *Phaedo* 66d–67e, than with Stoic ideas of beauty—if we are to give any weight to the texts on physiognomics; e.g. Diog. Laert. 7.173.

<sup>38</sup> The main argument of the letter is analyzed in Inwood (2005) 259–270; a more detailed treatment is given in Inwood (2007a) 155–181.

<sup>39</sup> Only the 94th and 95th letters exceed it in length. Compare Seneca's apologies for length in much shorter letters: *Ep.* 30.18: 'tam longas epistulas', 45.13: 'ne epistulae modum excedam', 58.37: 'in longum exeo'. Lana 1991 provides statistics on the lengths of the individual letters.

<sup>40</sup> *Ep.* 66.2–3: 'Aliter certe Claranum nostrum coepi intueri: formosus mihi videtur et tam rectus corpora quam est animo. Potest ex casa vir magnus exire, potest et ex deformi humilique corpusculo formosus animus ac magnus'.

It is not only that Claranus is brave in enduring his physical impairments, although that is true of him. It is actually that he is beautiful, *formosus* rather than *deformis*. What is intimated here is that the intellectual activity represented by the letter is somehow ennobling in itself, even without any subsidiary payoff in conduct. There is a distinct resemblance between Claranus as the contemplative philosopher and the iconic *sapiens* described within the letter, the ‘spirit that gazes upon what is real—that knows what to pursue and to avoid—that assigns value to things by the standard of nature, not by that of opinion—that injects itself into the cosmos as a whole and casts its contemplation over every action of the universe.’<sup>41</sup> Seneca’s recognition of his intellectual beauty amounts to a restatement of the self-amelioration justification from *De otio*, but with much greater emphasis and conviction.

Now Claranus himself is soon to be forgotten as the epistolary narrative moves on its intermittent way. His influence continues, though, in that he helps us to understand the notional significance of Seneca’s own age and ill health within the correspondence.<sup>42</sup> In the 67th letter, as in the 65th, Seneca draws attention to his chronic illness.

I am grateful to old age for keeping me to my bed. And why not be grateful on that account? Things that all along I should not have wanted to do, I now cannot do. My most abundant conversation is with books.

The parallel between himself and Claranus can hardly be missed, especially when the content of Epistle 67 investigates a question that follows very closely upon Epistle 66 and presupposes knowledge of it.<sup>43</sup> As the previous discussion was presented as a report on a ‘first day’s conversation,’ we are perhaps meant to think that this is the second, and to see the two letters together as an extended project in moral theory, a sort of preliminary edition of the separate *liber moralis philosophiae* mentioned repeatedly in the later books of Epistles.<sup>44</sup> It is then somewhat surprising that no further

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<sup>41</sup> *Ep.* 66.6: ‘animus intuens vera, peritus fugiendorum ac petendorum, non ex opinione sed ex natura pretia rebus inponens, toti se inserens mundo et in omnis eius actus contemplationem suam mittens’. The continuation of the sentence is less applicable, however.

<sup>42</sup> Not much developed in *De otio*, the sickness justification operates throughout the *Epistulae morales*. Tacitus concludes that the illness was feigned (*Ann.* 15.45.3), but this is not the point; see Griffin (1976) 362.

<sup>43</sup> The backward references are obvious even on a casual reading, especially in *Ep.* 67.3–4 and 67.15 (*re* Epicurus). Maurach (1970) 145, traces additional connections.

<sup>44</sup> References to the *liber moralis philosophiae* are found at *Epp.* 106.1–3, 108.1–2, 109.17; fragments in Vottero (1998) 206–209. As the questions treated in Epistles 102 (‘is the good a

mention is made of Claranus. But Seneca now intends to take full credit for the material presented. The conversation in which ethical theory is discussed is now taking place between himself and Lucilius through the medium of letters:

Every time a letter arrives from you, it seems to me that I am with you; I feel as though I were not just writing back but actually answering you. So let's take up the subject you are asking about and ask, as if conversing together, what it is like.<sup>45</sup>

Instead of learning of contemplative philosophy at two removes, through a report of conclusions arrived at elsewhere by Seneca and Claranus, the reader of the *Epistulae morales* is now given the opportunity to observe it directly as it unfolds between the correspondents.

Following *Ep.* 67, the framing narrative of the *Epistles* takes a new turn. Lucilius has at last determined to devote himself to the recommended life of leisure, abandoning his career in public service, and Seneca advises in *Ep.* 68 that part of his commitment to seclusion should be to conceal the very fact that he is committed to it ('et ipsum otium absconde', 68.1). With this rather cryptic remark, he launches into a recapitulation of the 'wider polity' justification from *De otio* 3. One who retires will be 'following the example of the Stoics, even if not their instructions'; but the example is in fact consistent with the instructions, for the Stoics do not enjoin service 'to just any state, nor [...] at all times or without ending' (*Ep.* 68.2: 'nec ad omnem rem publicam mittimus nec semper nec sine ullo fine'). Moreover, the wise person has a larger state which is worthy of his services. Because his true community is the entire world, he does not cease to serve the state even in retirement. All this is repeated from *De otio*, although the imagery is also expanded:

Indeed, it may be that in abandoning this one little corner he is moving into a greater and more spacious realm—that he is taking up a seat in heaven, and realizes now what a lowly position he held when he used to mount to the

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body?') and 108 ('does the wise person benefit anyone?') are said by Seneca to belong to it, we are meant to think of it as a systematic venture in ethical theory ('quos cum maxime ordino continentis totam moralis philosophiae partem', 108.1). The assumptions in Leeman (1953) are challenged in Inwood (2007a) 262–264; and see also Lana (1991) 275–278.

<sup>45</sup> *Ep.* 67.2: 'Si quando intervenerunt epistulae tuae, tecum esse mihi videor et sic adficio animo tamquam tibi non rescribam sed respondeam. Itaque et de hoc quod quaeris, quasi conloquar tecum, quale sit una scrutabimur'.

tribunal or preside from the curule chair. Bank this away in your mind: the wise person is never more active than when things divine and human come into his view.<sup>46</sup>

Again similar to *De otio* is the challenge voiced by the interlocutor in 68.10:

'So, Seneca,' you say, 'are you recommending leisure to me? Are you lowering yourself to Epicurean maxims?'

The reply is that the *otium* Seneca recommends will enable greater and also more beautiful actions than the affairs of the forum. He wishes heartily that Lucilius had settled on this plan ('propositum') much earlier in life; even at his more advanced age, though, the retreat will yield good results.

But the letter also differs from *De otio* in two very noticeable ways. First, the content Lucilius is to study in his retirement is restricted in the same way as in Epistle 8: he is to spend the time speaking truth to himself, identifying his personal failings and treating them severely. This will be an unsavory business, comparable to the least pleasant procedures of medicine: the treatment of wounds and infections, the administration of emetics and purges, the clearing of bronchial suppurations. Second, and not unrelated, is the emphasis on circumspection, a theme also present in the earlier epistle (8.1 'I have hidden myself away and closed the doors'). The reason offered to Lucilius for secretive behavior is a trivial one, that only if people do not know about his studies will they leave him alone to pursue them. But the point is novel, and odd, especially when Seneca goes so far as to suggest that Lucilius should name ill health or weakness or laziness as a pretext (68.3). Coming from one who has himself put forward illness repeatedly to justify all kinds of studies—and who is now publishing that fact abroad in written works meant for posterity—the remark can only be sharply ironical.

## VI

Seneca's thoughts on the *contemplatio veri* turn out to be exceptionally rich and varied. While he thinks of himself as a Stoic, he does not allow himself to be limited by the stereotypical notion of Stoics as active rather than contemplative; indeed he lays considerable emphasis on the value of θεωρία

<sup>46</sup> *Ep.* 68.2: 'immo fortasse relicto uno angulo in maiora atque ampliora transit et caelo inpositus intellegit, cum sellam aut tribunal ascenderet, quam humili loco sederit. Depone hoc apud te, numquam plus agere sapientem quam cum in conspectum eius divina atque humana venerunt'.

as we know it from Plato and Aristotle; that is, as *sui causa* reflection on a variety of issues in physics, theology, metaphysics, and ethical theory. In attempting to justify the philosophical retreat in *De otio*, he works primarily from well-established principles of Stoic ethics; in the *Epistulae morales*, he enlarges upon this heritage somewhat, adapting it to his needs in different contexts.

His most frequent strategy for defending the life of contemplation is to insist upon its moral benefits, on its improving one's own character for future conduct or that of others through written or oral teaching. This approach works well as long as the content of one's reflection is restricted to questions of value or to the techniques of self-therapy. When the topic is metaphysics or logic, however, or even some points in moral theory, the justification is more difficult. In the *Epistulae morales*, though apparently not in *De otio*, Seneca shows himself aware of the inconcinnity and accordingly devises various rhetorical strategies to preserve the decorum of his larger project even as he allows the more technical topics to encroach upon it. Readers of the *Epistles* are expected to savor the ironies that result.

The narrative and dramatic frame of the *Epistulae morales* provides Seneca with additional means of expression on this topic, but also with a particular need for tact in addressing it. Because the letters do offer Rome a lifelike representation of their author and his associates, Seneca must proceed with caution lest he seem to endorse an attitude toward public service which could prove dangerous for his philosophically-minded readers. Apparently cognizant of the forces which would eventually lead to the criminalization of Stoic philosophy under imperial law, Seneca tactfully deemphasizes the notion that all existing states are corrupt beyond repair. Instead, he offers chronic ill health, Socrates' 'bridle of Theages', as a safer form of exemption from the senatorial career. Through his portrait of Claranus, and by implication through his portrait of himself, he endeavors to replace the negative connotations of illness with a more uplifting ideal of the independence of intellectual life from the body.

These representational elements of the epistle collection offer us an appealing picture of Seneca's life in retreat. We see a man deeply engaged in reading and composition, pondering the deeper meaning of each event of the day, sharing entire days in conversation with friends on a variety of philosophical issues. This at least is what he envisions of the contemplative life, and it is what he would like his readers to believe is the life he leads.

However, it does not follow that we as historians of philosophy must accept the picture Seneca offers us. Just as the author of the *Epistles* has a clear motive for representing himself as more of an invalid than he may

really have been, so also he might choose to show himself living a fictionalized version of the contemplative existence even if his real practice of philosophy were rather different. It is entirely possible that what he presents in some epistle as the outcome of a conversation is in fact culled from some written source.<sup>47</sup> In at least one case, that of *Epp.* 66–67, we indeed watch the same set of philosophical ideas being framed first as a real conversation and then as an epistolary conversation derived, it seems, from a conversation ‘with books.’ We cannot draw any conclusion, then, about the extent to which live philosophical discussions were going on among Seneca’s contemporaries. What we can be sure of is that such conversations do figure in his *conception* of the contemplative life.

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<sup>47</sup> This is in response to Inwood (2007b). In my presentation at Gargnano, I argued the case on more technical grounds, from what seem to me to be indications of a written source informing the notionally oral discussion that is the substance of *Ep.* 66. Although I now reserve that argument for separate treatment, I would like to thank the Gargnano participants for their comments and suggestions on that occasion.

BEYOND THE *THEORETIKOS BIOS*:  
PHILOSOPHY AND *PRAXIS* IN SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

Emidio Spinelli

I

'In the eyes of philosophers who spoke in the name of the thinking ego, it had always been the curse of *contingency* that condemned the realm of merely human affairs to a rather low status in the ontological hierarchy. But before the modern age, there had existed—not many but a few—well-trodden escape routes, at least for philosophers. In antiquity, there was the *bios theoretikos*: the thinker dwelt in the neighborhood of things necessary and everlasting, partaking in their Being to the extent that this is possible for mortals'.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the merits of Arendt's judgement here, and its reliability, it seems to me that it bears witness to that pervasive line of thought which holds that the primary constitutive element attributed to human beings—that of contemplative activity—is also the ultimate dimension of our life.

This is not, however, the field of enquiry of this paper. I will rather be concerned with the critical attitude to this view to be found in certain significant passages of Sextus Empiricus' writings. My analysis will be particularly directed to two thematic cores: the first relating to the destructive aspect of the Sceptical polemic, the second, inversely, setting out to delineate the positive solution contained in this—a solution that was legitimately claimed, I contend, by ancient Pyrrhonism in its most mature phase.

Against this background, I will therefore attempt to examine, in order:

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt (1978) 2.27. This statement seems to echo the well known central digression in the *Theaetetus* (172c–177c) and hence refer to a Platonic tradition *lato sensu*, as well as to Aristotle (see Gerson [2004], and with regard to the organization of the school, Natali [1991]; as regards Theophrastus, see Bénatouïl's contribution in this volume). For an analysis of the concept of *θεωρία* within this tradition see—at least—Festugière (1936) and Nightingale (2004); and for an introduction to the different positions with respect to the ideal of the contemplative life, see Jaeger (1948/1928); Boll (1950); Grilli (1953); Joly (1956); Rausch (1982). I would also cautiously refer to Redlow (1966) and Blumenberg (1987).

- Sextus' reappraisal of the role of any possible contemplation/θεωρία that is linked to dogmatic philosophical claims; and, more particularly, his opposition to the contentions of the Stoics, including those of an ethical and practical order, and to their negative implications;
- his delineation of a legitimate use of cognitive efforts which, whilst not attaining to any definitive or absolute conclusion, will nonetheless allow for the construction of an alternative epistemological model; one that is capable of representing not only a satisfactory interaction in relation to the world, but also a 'theoretical' point of reference for our actions.

## II

It will therefore firstly be necessary to seek out from within the Sextan *corpus* those passages in which the theoretical approach to reality becomes—indirectly, but with a certain solidity—the objective of the Pyrrhonist critique.

When moving in this direction, what becomes immediately evident is that Sextus' polemic grows sharper the moment he sets out to dismantle the eudaimonistic claims relating to the so-called 'art of living' or τέχνη περὶ τὸν βίον.

Without ever directly addressing the question of the contemplative life construed as an end in itself—that can neither be superseded by other ends nor be functional to them—Sextus chooses to take issue with another notion, one that is not so much Platonic or Aristotelian as Hellenistic or post-Hellenistic: that of θεωρία, understood as the cognitive background to action which is correct, right, or good. In the eyes of the dogmatists (Sextus' polemical targets), a moral discourse that is productive of happiness can be counted legitimate *if and only if* it rests on strong theoretical conclusions regarding the nature of reality (on what a Sceptic would call 'non-evident/unclear objects', τὰ ἄδηλα),<sup>2</sup> both on the ontological plane *lato sensu* and on that of the essence of true and absolute values or disvalues.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For the position of Antiochus of Ascalon on this question, see Cic. *De fin.* 5.58 (where 'consideratio cognitioque rerum caelestium et earum, quas a natura occultatas et latentes indagare ratio potest ...' is discussed) and, above all, Bénatouïl (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Note Sextus' programmatic consideration in *Adv. math.* 11.2, where Socrates is presented as the first philosopher who assumed such an attitude. On this question, see also Spinelli (1995) 143–144 and Bett (1997) 48–49.



This is the dogmatic premise against which Sextus pits himself in his treatment of ethical questions in general. His arguments become much more specific in *Adv. math.* 11.168–215, where he discusses the claims of those dogmatists that preach the existence, practicability and usefulness of a presumed ‘art of living’.

Following a method of argumentation that is frequently applied in his writings, Sextus declares (*Adv. math.* 11.168) that he wishes to add some further criticisms to his previous objections to dogmatic ethical positions, which he had put forward only ‘in part’ (ἀπὸ μέρους). These additional criticisms bring to completion<sup>4</sup> his demolition of the myth of the morally perfect sage (a Stoic myth, above all). His basic polemical target—the dogmatic promise of complete happiness—therefore remains unchanged, but it is investigated further, bringing the notion of the ‘art of living’ into clearer focus.

It seems to me that it would be difficult to establish which philosophical school of the Hellenistic era was the first to coin this phrase and give it a central place within its own system of thought.<sup>5</sup> Sextus, however, seems to attribute it to Epicurus,<sup>6</sup> who at any rate is the first to be mentioned in this regard, before any other thinker.<sup>7</sup> The establishment of an equivalence between ‘art of living’ and φιλοσοφία is laid at Epicurus’ doorstep, along with the notion that philosophy is an activity that is indispensable to the realization of a happy life, thanks to its theoretical exploitation of solid arguments and discourses (λόγοις καὶ διαλογισμοῖς).

Despite this attribution, it seems undeniable that in Sextus’ eyes the Stoic definition of the ‘art of living’—as provided in *Adv. math.* 11.170<sup>8</sup>—is far more radical, since it is more openly (ἄντικρυς) theoretical in its philosophical roots. It is therefore also in greater need of confutation:

<sup>4</sup> They are presented *ad abundantiam* (ἐκ παραλλήλου δοκιμάζειν: on this expression, see Spinelli [1995] 342; see also Bett [1997] 184).

<sup>5</sup> On the presence of this attitude among the Sophists, Socrates, and in certain Platonic texts, see Horn (1998) 19 and 22–26; on the primacy accorded to the Socrates-Cynics-Stoics axis, see Sellars (2003) Chs. 2 and 3. A Stoic origin is also suggested by Bett (1997) 185. For a concise overview, see also Schmid (1991) 253–260.

<sup>6</sup> See also Cic. *De fin.* 1.72; *contra* see however Bett (1997) 186.

<sup>7</sup> See therefore *Adv. math.* 11.169, where Sextus uses, perhaps significantly, the past tense: ‘καὶ διὰ τοῦτο Ἐπίκουρος μὲν ἔλεγε ...’.

<sup>8</sup> See also Stob. *Anth.* 2.66.19–67.2 (= *SVF* 3.560 = Long and Sedley [1987] text 61G), as well as Cic. *De fin.* 4.16. For the hypothesis that Sextus *also* has Epictetus in his sights, see Sellars (2003) 86 n. 3. On Seneca’s attitude towards theory, see Graver, 84–86 in this volume.

οἱ δὲ Στωικοὶ καὶ ἀντικρὺς φασι τὴν φρόνησιν, ἐπιστήμην οὖσαν ἀγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν καὶ οὐδετέρων, τέχνην ὑπάρχειν περὶ τὸν βίον, ἣν οἱ προσλαβόντες μόνοι γίνονται καλοί, μόνοι πλούσιοι, σοφοὶ μόνοι.<sup>9</sup>

Along with certain other relevant aspects of Stoic doctrine, two important points need to be stressed here:

- Firstly the identification—of distant but obvious Socratic origin—of wisdom, one of the four ‘cardinal’ Stoic virtues,<sup>10</sup> as a form of science<sup>11</sup> capable of discerning the good, the bad and what is neither good nor bad, and hence of suggesting what one must or must not do;<sup>12</sup>
- Secondly the possibility that those who possess such science may obtain a series of perfect attitudes/conditions. These, in the context of the wider ancient debate *pro* and *contra* the overblown ethical rationalism of the Stoics, and in line with the conclusion that ‘sapiens est dives, formosus, liber’,<sup>13</sup> were classified under the label of *Stoicorum paradoxa*.

Following a demonstration of two of these *perfections*,<sup>14</sup> and after a first round of genuinely sceptical objections,<sup>15</sup> we come to a more thoroughgoing

<sup>9</sup> This definition (= *SVF* 3.598) reappears in *Adv. math.* 11.246; see also *SVF* 2.117; 3.265 and 266. On the other hand, in another passage, *Pyrrh. hyp.* 3.239, to which we will return shortly, and in *Adv. math.* 9.162 (= *SVF* 3.274), instead of οὐδετέρων we find the more technical ἀδιαφόρων. The definition put forward here is based, from a materialistic point of view, on a particular condition (well known to Sextus: see *Adv. math.* 11.23) of the ‘ruling part’ or ἡγεμονικόν; this may also be compared to the general consideration of virtue as ‘harmonious disposition’ (διάθεσις ὁμολογουμένη: Diog. Laert. 7.89= *SVF* 3.39= Long-Sedley [1987] text 61 A). On the whole question, see Forschner (1995) 205–206.

<sup>10</sup> See therefore *SVF* 3.262–264 and 266.

<sup>11</sup> For some significant parallels, see *SVF* 3.95; 255 (where Chrysippus ‘defends’ Zeno, attributing the equivalence φρόνησις/ἐπιστήμη to him); and again *SVF* 3.264–265. See also some of the definitions in Pseudo-Andronicus (e.g. *SVF* 3.266, 269, 272–273) and the Sextan passages collected in *SVF* 3.274; as well as *Adv. math.* 11.90–95. More generally, on the identification of ἀρετή with τέχνη, see *SVF* 3.214 and 278. Lastly, for the characteristics of ἐπιστήμη according to the Stoics, see at least *SVF* 3.112 (= Long-Sedley [1987] text 41H) and *SVF* 3.294 (= Long-Sedley [1987] text 26H) (with regards to the ‘liberal arts’).

<sup>12</sup> For this alternative definition of φρόνησις see also, for example, Stobaeus’ testimony in *SVF* 3.262. Furthermore, as Sandbach (1989<sup>2</sup>) 42 n. 1 rightly points out, ‘these alternatives illustrate the fact that the word *phronêsis*, translated “wisdom”, covered both theoretical and practical wisdom, both knowledge of what is or exists and of what ought to be done’.

<sup>13</sup> See *SVF* 3.589–603; for our Sextan passage, see in particular *SVF* 3.598.

<sup>14</sup> This is conducted in *Adv. math.* 11.170 through syllogisms not found in other sources. It is hard to say whether or not these faithfully reproduce Stoic arguments or whether they are the work of Sextus or his Pyrrhonist sources; for further difficulties, *bluffs* even, present in this argumentation, see also Schofield (1991) 113 n. 1 and Bett (1997) 188–189.

<sup>15</sup> See *Adv. math.* 11.171–172, where we have the citation of two passages linked to the

polemical analysis (cfr. *Adv. math.* 11.173–179). This is not limited to showing that the dogmatic theses on the ‘art of living’ are unsustainable, but intends rather to demonstrate *why* (διότι, § 173) they are so. Sextus here puts forward objections that derive from a more mature phase of the Pyrrhonist tradition. He refers to the tropes of Agrippa: not only to the mode of reciprocity, but also to ‘the mode based on dissonance’ (διαφωνία). Thanks to the latter, he insists on the fact that there is no single definition of the ‘art of living’, since dogmatic philosophers do not *de facto* speak with one voice,<sup>16</sup> presenting instead a dissonant multiplicity of positions (as is evident when one confronts those of Epicurus, of the Stoics and of the Peripatetics).<sup>17</sup>

The cumulative mention of such diverse philosophical directions would seem to confirm that the true purpose of this polemic is to oppose any system that claims to anchor our ethical choices to some kind of strong and unchallengeable basic theoretical apparatus.

### III

It is not possible to dwell here on each specific part of Sextus’ argument, which, in any case, is not always particularly lucid or doxographically faultless.<sup>18</sup> Instead, what needs to be underlined is that he decides to pursue the polemic by conceding *per absurdum* that it is in fact possible to reach a solid agreement on the existence of just *one* ‘art of living’. Sextus here chooses—again not by chance I believe—the Stoic model,<sup>19</sup> which assimilates this art to a virtue, or more exactly, to ‘practical wisdom’ or φρόνησις, and potentially extends it, as another text confirms, περὶ ὅλον τὸν βίον, to all human actions.<sup>20</sup>

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unquestioned *auctoritas* of Timon (frs. 65 and 66 Diels and Di Marco). Regarding the second of these in particular, I wish only to note here that this might perhaps most usefully be inserted into the broader debate on the question of the value/disvalue of the βίος σχολαστικός. Timon’s satirical attack is in fact directed at those who waste time and money in the conviction that they can acquire wisdom by going ‘to school’ (the schools of philosophers, and perhaps Stoic philosophers above all?), as is shown by the presence of the expression ἐνὶ σχολῇ, on which see Di Marco (1989) 268.

<sup>16</sup> They do not talk ‘with one accord’ (ὁμοφώνως), as we read also in *Pyrrh. hyp.* 3.239.

<sup>17</sup> Here we find those schools that are positively convinced that they have found the truth, once and for all. They represent dogmatism for Sextus in its true and most determinate sense: cfr. *Pyrrh. hyp.* 1.1–3 and, on this important passage, also Marchand (2010).

<sup>18</sup> At times Sextus seems to deliberately distort the genuine teachings of the dogmatic schools he contests; on this, see Spinelli (1995) 346–347, and Bett (1997) 195.

<sup>19</sup> This Stoic option is presented in greater depth in *Pyrrh. hyp.* 3.240: see Spinelli (1995) 351.

<sup>20</sup> See *SVF* 3.560. As to the difficult textual constitution of this passage and the complexity of its meaning see, at least, Bénatouil (2006) 177–180.

Passing these first two objections of Sextus (though they would merit greater attention),<sup>21</sup> I prefer to concentrate here on the third wave of criticism because it is particularly useful in clarifying the attitude Sextus adopts with regard to the presumed significance of θεωρία in the ethical field.

Let us read the relevant passage (*Adv. math.* 11.184):

Εἴπερ τε ἡ περὶ τὸν βίον ἐπιστήμη, τουτέστιν ἡ φρόνησις, θεωρητικὴ τῶν τε ἀγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν καὶ οὐδετέρων ἐστίν, ἥτοι ἑτέρα καθέστηκε τῶν ἀγαθῶν ὧν λέγεται ἐπιστήμη τυγχάνειν, ἡ αὐτὴ ἐστὶ τὸ ἀγαθόν, καθὸ καὶ ὀριζόμενοι τινες ἐξ αὐτῶν φασιν· ἀγαθόν ἐστιν ἀρετὴ ἢ τὸ μετέχον ἀρετῆς.<sup>22</sup>

The starting point is yet again the oft-repeated Stoic equivalence<sup>23</sup> between ‘art of living’/‘practical wisdom’/‘science’. The additional and significant element here is that the function of such φρόνησις/ἐπιστήμη is described through the adjective ‘capable of contemplating’ (θεωρητικὴ). This indicates in the clearest possible way, and without any ambiguity, the true background of the philosophical positions against which Sextus is arguing.<sup>24</sup> Any eudaimonistically positive ethical end<sup>25</sup> can only be guaranteed—not just for the Stoics, but more generally in the case of any dogmatic approach<sup>26</sup>—exclusively by a (concomitant) theoretical approach, one that aims to know the structure of reality *in toto*.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See *Adv. math.* 11.181–183; for further comments, see Spinelli (1995) 348–353 and Bett (1997) 197–202.

<sup>22</sup> Pace Bett (1997) 202–203, given the context and the mode of citation, this can only refer to certain thinkers within the Stoic tradition (perhaps Chrysippus and/or his followers or successors, such as Hecato? In this regard see *SVF* 3.30, as well as 3.587 and Muller [2006] 216–217); note also the occurrence of the same ‘definition’ in *Adv. math.* 11.76; for further comments, see Spinelli (1995) 247.

<sup>23</sup> Apart from *Adv. math.* 11.170, see also *SVF* 3.95 (= Long-Sedley [1987] text 60K) and 280 (= Long-Sedley [1987] text 61D); for useful comments and references, see at least Isnardi Parente (1966) 287–307.

<sup>24</sup> In contrast with the case of ‘capable of knowing’ (γνωριστικός), used with regards to ‘ignorance’ (ἀφροσύνη) in *Adv. math.* 11.246; Sextus seems to attribute to this ‘folly’—*disserendi causa* and in a manner that is functional to his more general anti-pedagogic polemic—an identical capacity for ‘contemplating’ good/bad/*neutra*: see also *infra*, nn. 38–39.

<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding the full sufficiency of virtue for attaining happiness (see e.g. *SVF* 1.187; 3.39 and 49–51), the nexus φρόνησις/εὐδαιμονία seems particularly strong precisely in Chrysippus: *SVF* 3.53.

<sup>26</sup> See also Bett (1997) 203, who considers the Sextan objection to be valid far beyond the confines of Stoicism, ‘for any such alleged science would surely present itself as capable of discerning what is good and bad’, so that ‘in fact, the argument might well be considerably more successful against certain opponents other than the Stoics’.

<sup>27</sup> This is the prerogative of the Stoic sage, whose insightfulness nothing escapes (see especially *SVF* 1.66). Sextus in fact presents this sage, on the gnoseological plane, as capable

In order to confirm this strong continuity, circularity even, between theory and practice, it might be useful to cite another, parallel, passage from Sextus' work. At the beginning of *Pyrrh. hyp.* 3.239,<sup>28</sup> using very technical Stoic terms—such as ἀδιάφορον, a crucial concept in Hellenistic debate—the presumed 'art of living' is immediately explained and justified as that which 'has to do with the study of good, bad and indifferent things'.<sup>29</sup>

#### IV

These are the overall boundaries of Sextus' anti-Stoic attack. No less interesting are the single sections of his argument which address important theoretical questions and appear decidedly *original*: for instance, his discussion of the possible existence of 'practical wisdom', understood as 'science of itself' (ἐαυτῆς ἐπιστήμη).<sup>30</sup>

At any rate, leaving aside the question of the value of these observations of Sextus, certain considerations seem compelling here. In the first place, the area of application of Stoic φρόνησις<sup>31</sup> cannot simply be restricted to the contemplative sphere, construed as self-sufficient and detached from practice. This appears to be confirmed in a text of Philo of Alexandria stating that φρόνησις is καὶ θεωρητικὴ [...] καὶ πρακτικὴ.<sup>32</sup> If, therefore, the celebrated 'art of living' exists, it can only be interpreted as something that concerns both knowledge and human action.<sup>33</sup> As to its structure, thanks

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of attaining full knowledge of the truth, beyond all doubt and difficulties: see at least *Adv. math.* 7.38–45.

<sup>28</sup> In addition, one should not forget Chrysippus' tripartite breakdown of φρόνησις into logic-physics-ethics: see *SVF* 2.910. It may perhaps be compared, on a wider scale, to *SVF* 2.42. Diogenes of Babylon would appear to assume an analogous position: see *SVF* 3 Diog. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Tr. Annas-Barnes (1994) 205. See also and again *SVF* 3.266 and 274.

<sup>30</sup> See *Adv. math.* 11.185–187; I cannot dwell here on the details of Sextus' arguments: see therefore, for further comments, Spinelli (1995) 353–355 and Bett (1997) 202–205.

<sup>31</sup> At least this is how it is presented by Sextus, who is perhaps indebted here—in accordance with the idea of the necessary 'mutual involvement' (ἀντακολουθία) of all virtues (on this see the key texts in *SVF* 3.295–304, and *SVF* 3.243 and 280, as well as Annas [1993] 81–82)—to a Chrysippean version of this doctrine, for which φρόνησις 'a une portée plus générale que les autres vertus [...]: elle paraît ainsi être la condition première des autres vertus, et cela l'apparente au rôle qu'elle joue chez Aristote' (Gourinat [2007] 51–52).

<sup>32</sup> See *SVF* 3.202; also *SVF* 3.256, 295 and above all Bénatoui (2009), and Bénatoui (2007) 10–13, for an interesting interpretation of Diog. Laert. 7.130 (= *SVF* 3.687), which draws an equivalence between the 'rational life' (βίος λογικός) and the virtuous life, well beyond any sterile juxtaposition of the contemplative life and the active life.

<sup>33</sup> See, among others, Isnardi Parente (1966) 303; Bréhier (1951) 243–244; Forschner (1995<sup>2</sup>) 207; and Donini, in Inwood-Donini (1999) 723.

to which the true sage *spectat simulque agit* (Sen. *Ep.* 95.10), other witnesses besides Sextus provide us with information. These all insist, of course, on the centrality of θεωρεῖν, but also claim that virtues possess not just a common end, but shared ‘theorems’.<sup>34</sup>

Sextus seems to be very clear in what he says about both these aspects of the ‘contemplative’ dimension of Stoic φρόνησις, understood as the art of living. It is indeed true that in *Against the Ethicists* he only makes use of a ‘shortened’ definition of τέχνη as a ‘system made up of apprehensions’ (σύστημα ἐκ καταλήψεων).<sup>35</sup> It is equally true however, that his polemic (an anti-Stoic and more generally anti-dogmatic one) seems to refer, in more than one passage, to another (Stoic) definition of τέχνη as a synonym of virtue, considered as a ‘system made up of theorems jointly exercised’ (cfr. *SVF* 3.214).

There is one further area—and only a passing reference can be made to it here—in which Sextus’ polemic goes beyond exclusively ethical boundaries whilst not renouncing an attack on the sterile crystallization of the aforementioned theoretical precepts. This is the area of the so-called ‘arts’, and especially ‘liberal’ arts, which are presented as equipped with a strong, normative and cognitive apparatus.<sup>36</sup> For this reason, Sextus maintains that it is legitimate to call into question the ‘theorems’/θεωρήματα of the arts, in that they represent the *condicio sine qua non* for their practical application. In his discussion of the arts, as elsewhere, Sextus therefore attacks that dogmatically rigid vision that entrusts the λόγος—interpreted by the

<sup>34</sup> See the above-mentioned passage from Stobaeus (*SVF* 3.280= Long-Sedley [1987] text 61D), without forgetting the role that more specific and particular ‘theorems’ play for every virtue/science. See also *SVF* 3.295 and 278. Neither is Marcus Aurelius (Long-Sedley [1987] text 61P), I maintain, moving in a different direction when he insists on those δόγματα that represent—for better or worse—inescapable, normatively cogent *condiciones* for every action.

<sup>35</sup> See *Adv. math.* 11.182, tr. Bett (1997) 30. This definition, at any rate, is quoted and attacked by Sextus in many other passages; for all relevant occurrences, see Janáček (2000) s.v. σύστημα.

<sup>36</sup> Although there is no shortage of criticism directed against the apparatus of dogmatic ‘precepts’ concerning logic, physics and ethics, here I prefer to concentrate on attacks against those ‘theorems’ that provide the foundations for grammar (see *Adv. math.* 1.47, 49, 80, 90, 95, 132, 221, 268–269, 301), rhetoric (specifically in *Adv. math.* 2.11–12 and, more broadly, as cursorily mentioned in the final section of *Adv. math.* 2.113), geometry (*Adv. math.* 3.17, 74, 92–93, 109), arithmetic (*Adv. math.* 4.1), astrology (*Adv. math.* 5.49) and finally music (*Adv. math.* 6.30). More generally, on Sextus’ attitude to the liberal arts, see Spinelli (2010).

Stoics as *ratio perfecta, recta* and *consummata*<sup>37</sup>—with the task of determining the orientation of human life, in each field.

We should not forget another favourite polemical target of Sextus, namely educational processes of all kinds. He points to noteworthy difficulties in the formulation of dogmatic arguments on the matter and demolishes the very idea that solid theoretical knowledge may be transmitted regardless of elements such as its object, the teacher, the learner or the method used. Behind this sort of negative meta-pedagogy Sextus' struggle against any claim to identify and teach rigid principles is once again discernible. Such an approach is not just systematically attacked by Sextus from the very outset of his attempt to demolish the 'liberal' arts (cfr. *Adv. math.* 1.8–40), but it is also rejected—displaying a meaningful correlation of intent—in the field of ethics,<sup>38</sup> both in the 'moral section' of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*Pyrrh. hyp.* 3.250–273) and in the last section of *Against the Ethicists* (*Adv. math.* 11.216–256).<sup>39</sup>

## V

The polemic against the dogmatic forms of θεωρία is therefore indicative of a very precise direction in Sextus' work. It arises from a broader attack and moves against both the theoretical and practical claims relating to λόγος (whether considered in a general philosophical or in a 'technical' sense); or, to be more precise, against that cognitive criterion that, already according to Philolaus, 'is capable of reflecting on the nature of the whole', since 'it has a certain affinity with this'.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, again, it is on the moral plane (and still within *Against the Ethicists*) that the genuine Pyrrhonist philosophical attitude emerges most clearly. In a passage (*Adv. math.* 11.160–167) that, significantly perhaps, precedes

<sup>37</sup> See Sen. *Ep.* 76.9–10 (= *SVF* 3.200a = Long-Sedley [1987] text 63D); and *Epp.* 31.8, 124.13–14; *SVF* 3.178.

<sup>38</sup> With regard to this matter, Donini (Inwood-Donini [1999] 705–715) offers some valid considerations that are *also* useful for gaining a better understanding of Sextus' polemical target. These have to do with the structure, contents, method and objectives of Stoic 'moral education', designed as it is to ensure the possession of 'a complex of propositions and judgements which are perfectly consistent with each other and with right reason, coinciding with the law of cosmic nature and the will of Zeus' (715).

<sup>39</sup> For further details, see Spinelli (1995) 379–405 and Bett (1997) 224–254; also Machuca (2004) 508.

<sup>40</sup> *Adv. math.* 7.92, tr. Bett (2005) 20.

the section dedicated to the ‘art of living’, Sextus appears to be unambiguously providing those guidelines for sceptical action that allow one to live ‘without any need of the absolute certainty contained by the Stoic “*phronesis-technē*”’.<sup>41</sup> Here he firstly recapitulates the accusations made by the dogmatists (mostly Stoic in origin?),<sup>42</sup> according to which the Sceptics have condemned themselves to total inactivity and complete inconsistency. In order to demonstrate this inconsistency, Sextus’ opponents refer to the ‘case-study’ of the tyrant.<sup>43</sup> If a tyrant were to force a Sceptic to perform repugnant and unspeakable acts (such as killing his own father),<sup>44</sup> what should the Pyrrhonist do? The answer seems to come down to a stark alternative: either disobey the tyrant, thus voluntarily asking for his own death, or give in, obeying the tyrant and committing parricide. In both cases—the dogmatist argument runs—the Sceptic’s behaviour will be dictated by a choice (and a corresponding refusal), and he will have to turn to a superior criterion, a *θεωρία*, that will help him distinguish what is truly good from what is truly evil. The Sceptic therefore, despite his rejection of all forms of cognitively normative ethics, will in fact act in the same way as the dogmatist, who is the only one to ‘have apprehended with confidence that there is something to be avoided and to be chosen’.<sup>45</sup>

Sextus’ reply is worth quoting in full (*Adv. math.* 11.165–166):

ταῦτα δὴ λέγοντες οὐ συνιάσιν, ὅτι κατὰ μὲν τὸν φιλόσοφον λόγον οὐ βιοῖ ὁ σκεπτικός (ἀνενέργητος γὰρ ἐστὶν ὅσον ἐπὶ τούτῳ), κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἀφιλόσοφον τήρησιν δύναται τὰ μὲν αἰρεῖσθαι, τὰ δὲ φεύγειν. (166) ἀναγκαζόμενός τε ὑπὸ τυράννου τι τῶν ἀπηγορευμένων πράττειν, τῇ κατὰ τοὺς πατέριους νόμους καὶ τὰ ἔθνη προλήψει τυχὸν τὸ μὲν ἐλεῖται, τὸ δὲ φεύζεται· καὶ ῥᾶν γε οἶσει τὸ σκληρὸν παρὰ τὸν ἀπὸ τῶν δογμάτων, ὅτι οὐδὲν ἕξωθεν τούτων προσδοξάζει καθάπερ ἐκείνους.

First of all, Sextus is convinced that it is impossible to remain completely inactive,<sup>46</sup> and therefore no fall into quietism or resignation is contemplated. The Sceptical solution will appear to be leading in that direction only in the eyes of those who, pushing their interpretation far beyond the limits

<sup>41</sup> Tsekourakis (1974) 49; alternatively, for a different evaluation of the possible and positive Pyrrhonist project for an art of living, see Sellars (2003) 101–103.

<sup>42</sup> See frs. 351–362 Hülser (*Adv. math.* 11.162–165= fr. 360).

<sup>43</sup> See again Bett (1997) 175–176 and also Laursen (2004); Spinelli (2005) 143–145.

<sup>44</sup> See Diog. Laert. 9.108.

<sup>45</sup> *Adv. math.* 11.162, tr. Bett (1997) 27. The verb *καταλαμβάνειν* is used here in its strong Stoic sense and therefore with the corollary of a clear assent to that proposition which indicates what is the right thing to do, or the wrong thing to avoid. On this mechanism of Stoic action, see especially Inwood (1985) 95–101.

<sup>46</sup> See above all *Pyrrh. hyp.* 1.23 and *Adv. math.* 7.30.



of what is reasonable, insist upon the dogmatic moral approach as the only standard for ethical phenomena.<sup>47</sup> In fact, it is only the dogmatic philosopher who bases his choices or refusals (at the very least) on the two following specific presuppositions: 1. that these resolutions can only stem from a process of philosophical reasoning or λόγος; 2. that this λόγος is theoretically strong, because it is linked to the absolute identification of what is true or false, right or wrong, decent or indecent—in other words, of good or evil. Anyone who, like the Pyrrhonist, will not accept these assumptions, and therefore have no access to any indestructible θεωρία, is bound to strike dogmatists as being inappropriate or eccentric. To put it more clearly, the dogmatists do not wish to renounce the militant intervention of rationality which they still regard as always being the best instrument we have for bringing our purposes into effect.<sup>48</sup> It is for this reason that we should all regulate each of our actions ‘in accordance with philosophical theory (κατὰ τὸν φιλόσοφον λόγον)’.<sup>49</sup> Only in this way may we legitimately speak of coherent and above all justifiable *praxis*, thus exhibiting those basic (though too often rigidly dogmatic, or even fundamentalist) theoretical beliefs on which both the acceptance and the rejection of given values is grounded, while also engaging, should it prove necessary, in a struggle against alternative ethical models.

Taken together, such dogmatic presuppositions—whether ancient or modern—really seem to leave little space for the poor Sceptic. From the point of view of dogmatic philosophers, the Sceptical position itself seems condemned either to obvious and repeated theoretical-rational deficits, or to inexplicable irrational failures.

Despite these radical and tenacious objections, however, Sextus insists that he knows the way out of this apparent *impasse*. He lays claim to an autonomous and legitimate space for Sceptic moral action. Almost as in an act of provocation—or at any rate in full awareness of the originality of his position—Sextus begins by refuting precisely those moral rules that dogmatists like to fix once and for all, for all times and places. A gesture of this kind does not condemn the Sceptic to moral paralysis or inactivity: it is rather the first step towards the formulation of an alternative proposal.

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<sup>47</sup> See Hossenfelder (1968) 66ff.; on the limits and the misunderstandings of anti-Pyrrhonist critics, see also Vogt (1998) 129–130.

<sup>48</sup> See Rescher (1980) 223.

<sup>49</sup> For the theoretical roots of such an attitude in Parmenides, see at least Sextus' interpretation at *Adv. math.* 7.112.

The Sceptic philosopher holds that it is possible to coherently engage in the countless decisions of moral life without running the risk of turning into a senseless plant.<sup>50</sup> From this perspective, one places one's trust not in the strength of any philosophical λόγος or in the rigid norms of theoretical rationality; rather, one makes one's choices and rejections 'on the basis of non-philosophical observance (κατὰ τὴν ἀφιλόσοφον τήρησιν)'. Here we have a new ethical sensibility, as is clearly indicated by the term τήρησις. This sensibility arises in accordance with one's repeated and consolidated experiences, thanks to which the Sceptic too can act, not just in the small events of everyday life, but even in drastic and dangerous situations, such as those represented by the terrible impositions of a tyrant. Should the tyrant order the Sceptic to kill his own father, the Sceptic will not be short of resources on the basis of which to make a decision, because his moral life is not a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate containing no indications. As Sextus explains—better, and more technically—the Sceptic will direct his behaviour one way or another and do so 'as the occasion occurs', or better still 'haphazardly'—one might almost say 'as it happens'.<sup>51</sup> His actions will be in conformity with a pre-conception (πρόληψις) rooted in himself that is logically and chronologically anterior to every moral action. The real distinction between this view and the ethical doctrines defended by dogmatists has to do with the correct meaning attributed to πρόληψις. It is not something fixed *a priori*, and once and for all, on the basis of constraining theoretical choices; it is rather the product of an empirical interaction with those customs and habits that are shaped by traditional norms and the laws of one's native country.<sup>52</sup> In matters of practical choice and of everyday behaviour, the Sceptic, therefore, holds to a complex and articulated system of already given reference points. These form a network of elements that may be used in decision-making, and may be integrated into a wider, global outlook (a sort of new and special

<sup>50</sup> For the first formulation of a strong critique against the vegetable-like condition of whoever suspends judgement, see Aristotle (*Metaph.* Γ.4.1006a14–15; and 1008b10–19; see also Striker [1980] 63 n. 25), and possibly—at an even earlier date—Plato's *Theaetetus* (171d). See too Decleva Caizzi (1981) 266 and now Lee (2010) 27–34.

<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the presence of τυχόν (unnecessarily emended in στοιχών by Blomqvist [1968] 99–100; see therefore Bett [1997] 172) reaffirms that 'the sceptic will do whatever results from the various psychological forces within him, and there is no way to predict what this will be' (Bett [1997] 179, though he insists perhaps too much on the exclusively relativistic character of the Pyrrhonist behavioural response). More generally, about the presence of an alleged form of 'moderate ethical realism' in Sextus' *Adv. math.* 11, see Machuca (2011).

<sup>52</sup> See also *Pyrrh. hyp.* 2.246, and again Diog. Laert. 9.108, where the reference to 'habit' or συνήθεια is explicit; see also *Adv. math.* 8.368.

παῖδεία?) that is both natural and intellectual.<sup>53</sup> It is a question of a set of rules of conduct that are either absorbed through educational processes, or dominant within the society in which the Sceptic lives. These stimuli to action will, in any case, seem the most functional with regard to achieving the double ethical goal clearly indicated elsewhere by Sextus: intellectual imperturbability (ἀταραξία) in matters of opinion, and the moderate control of one's affections (μετριοπάθεια) in matters forced upon us.<sup>54</sup> Though lacking a theory of absolute value, the Sceptic can, in this way, construct a coherent and justifiable moral world, historically linked to both the private and public development of the times in which he lives. All this is then converted into a kind of ethical-empirical *habitus*, perhaps not so attractive on the level of absolute cognitive knowledge, but pragmatically functional *hic et nunc*.

## VI

In light of the moral perspective thus constructed, the Sceptic too, therefore, acts and reacts in accordance with his own moral disposition. This will be empirical—linked, that is, to concrete situations and historically conditioned. The Sceptic's moral attitude will ensure that his path will be untroubled and in alignment with the course of the world. The Pyrrhonist will live free of the dogmatic claim to grant or deny absolute value to norms of behaviour, which are simply an integral part of daily life, arising from a continual process of confrontation with the reality of praxis. His actions, however, will not be left to chance; rather, they will follow four *fundamental categories* laid down by Sextus in a famous passage of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*Pyrrh. hyp.* 1.23–24). The list he proposes includes: 1. the guidance of nature, the specific destiny to which human beings must submit as creatures gifted with sensibility and intellect; 2. the necessitation intrinsic to one's primary affects or basic needs, such as hunger and thirst, together with the mechanical reactions that these engender; 3. the tradition associated with prevailing laws and customs, imposed in the form of acceptance of the norms of conduct of the community to which one belongs (to the extent that, for example, the Sceptic too, with regard to religion, will consider piety a good and impiety an evil); 4. the teaching of the arts, understood

<sup>53</sup> See Hossenfelder (1968) 72.

<sup>54</sup> See *Pyrrh. hyp.* 1.25–30; Spinelli (2005) Ch. 6; and Thorsrud (2003) 246–247.

as conveying the passive learning of established rules or the *know-how* advanced by some relevant τέχναι.<sup>55</sup>

This moral choice appears to be decisively out of step with strong, dogmatic ethical systems, especially because it negates the value often granted to theory by both philosophers and ordinary people (ιδιώται in the etymological sense of the term). It is a choice that moves within a different horizon, that of ‘empirical observance’ or τήρησις, which is a form of empirical generalization, but one circumscribed within precise limits. This bears the hallmark of an explicative model dear to Sextus, thanks to which it is perhaps possible and legitimate to define a meaning of θεωρεῖν that would be acceptable even to a Pyrrhonist.

The fact that few passages can be cited in this regard will come as no surprise, as Sextus does not like to positively express—especially in the first person—his own convictions or those of the Sceptics belonging to his Pyrrhonist ‘movement’ or ἀγωγή. A careful analysis, however, will allow us to identify at least a few passages that are important in this respect. I do not wish to return here to the concluding paragraphs of *Against the Astrologers* (cfr. *Adv. math.* 5.103–105), though they certainly contain much that would help us understand this Sextan attitude.<sup>56</sup> Instead, I would rather concentrate on two other passages that, to my mind, more clearly elucidate the points I wish to make. I am thinking of two sections of *Against the Logicians* which are part of Sextus’ long exposition on ‘semiology’, in both its dogmatic and Sceptic guises.<sup>57</sup> Here Sextus discusses in detail certain dogmatic objections raised against Pyrrhonist claims, and reiterates the fact that his critics have been exclusively preoccupied with the presumed existence of indicative signs. He therefore sets out the (weakly) epistemological basis supporting so-called recollective signs. These are explicitly linked to the persuasive force of life or βίος, to which assent is given ‘without holding any opinions’ or ἀδοξάστως.<sup>58</sup> In this context—where the necessity of fixing the rules for the cognitive functioning of a τέχνη is also maintained—a possible different meaning of θεωρεῖν seems to emerge: while grounded on simple observation,

<sup>55</sup> For recent, general treatments of Sextus’ ethical stance see at least Bett (2010) and Vogt (2010). See also now Grčić (2011).

<sup>56</sup> I have often stressed the importance of these passages elsewhere, in order to show the relevance of Sextus’ gnoseological position for certain contemporary epistemological theories, such as the ‘covering law model’ proposed by the ‘early Hempel’: see Spinelli (2005) Ch. 4, and Spinelli (2008) 34–36.

<sup>57</sup> See *Adv. math.* 8.141–299; also *Pyrrh. hyp.* 2.97–133.

<sup>58</sup> See *Pyrrh. hyp.* 2.102 and *Adv. math.* 8.158.

θεωρία also appears capable of engendering rules or principles (θεωρήματα) based on repeated acts of perception stored in one's memory. Accordingly, in *Adv. math.* 8.291<sup>59</sup> we read:

ἔτι ἐλέγετο, ὡς εἴπερ ἴδιον τέχνης ἐστὶ θεωρημα, δεήσει τοῦτο μὴ πρόδηλον ὑπάρχειν, ἀλλ' ἄδηλον καὶ διὰ σημείου ληπτόν, ἀγνοοῦντες ὅτι τῆς μὲν τῶν ἄλλων θεωρητικῆς τέχνης οὐδέν ἐστι θεωρημα, καθάπερ ὕστερον διδάξομεν τῆς δὲ ἐν τοῖς φαινομένοις στρεφομένης ἔστιν ἴδιόν τι θεωρημα. διὰ γὰρ τῶν πολλάκις τετηρημένων ἢ ἱστορημένων ποιεῖται τὰς τῶν θεωρημάτων συστάσεις· τὰ δὲ πολλάκις τηρηθέντα καὶ ἱστορηθέντα ἴδια καθειστῆκει τῶν πλειστάκις τηρησάντων, ἀλλ' οὐ κοινὰ πάντων.

Sextus insists here in using the vocabulary reserved for τήρησις, thereby delineating a space for the Pyrrhonist that is evidently close to the positions taken by medical empiricism.<sup>60</sup> And it would seem that this attitude is no mere dialectical diversion either. Without proposing any superior form of contemplation, it appears to justify the possibility of knowing by virtue of a τέχνη. This possibility depends on specific rules and enables one to formulate inferences, although its operations are limited to what appears (namely τὰ φαινόμενα).<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the Sceptic may even develop 'theorems' derived from empirical generalizations, but can do so *if and only if* these are restricted within the appropriate sphere of recollective signs. This clearly emerges from another passage immediately before the one just cited (*Adv. math.* 8.288):

καὶν δῶμεν δὲ διαφέρειν τῶν ἄλλων ζώων τὸν ἄνθρωπον λόγῳ τε καὶ μεταβατικῇ φαντασίᾳ καὶ ἐννοίᾳ ἀκολουθίας, ἀλλ' οὐ τοί γε καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀδήλοις καὶ ἀνεπικρίτως διαπεφωνημένοις συγχωρήσομεν αὐτὸν εἶναι τοιοῦτον, ἐν δὲ τοῖς φαινομένοις τηρητικὴν τινα ἔχειν ἀκολουθίαν, καθ' ἣν μνημονεύων, τίνα μετὰ τίνων τεθεώρηται καὶ τίνα πρὸ τίνων καὶ τίνα μετὰ τίνα, ἐκ τῆς τῶν προτέρων ὑποπτώσεως ἀνανεοῦται τὰ λοιπά.

<sup>59</sup> Among the more important texts on the matter, see at least Gal. *Subf. Emp.* 58.15 ff. and *De Meth. Med.* 2.7 (K. X 126), and also Frede (1990) 243. For some interesting additional observations, see Chisholm (1941) 372–375; Porro (1987) 256–269, Chiesa (1997); Pellegrin (2002) 460–462; and more generally now Tor (2010). On the positive role played by experience, or rather τήρησις, within Sextus' conceptual framework, see again Spinelli (2008).

<sup>60</sup> Analyzing our passage, Allen (2001) 106 rightly notes that: 'in view of this affinity between Pyrrhonism and ordinary experience, the attraction Empiricism holds for the Pyrrhonist is not surprising; for according to the Empirical conception, technical, artistic knowledge is just a more complicated and comprehensive version of ordinary experience, more systematic and extensive than the layman's, but not radically different in character'.

<sup>61</sup> Cfr. Frede (1990) 249. On the value of this τήρησις see also Barnes (1988) 72 and Blank (1998) 212–213.

## VII

At the end of this long trail it seems therefore possible to identify a field of action in Sextus' works that is productive even for *θεωρία*. To do so, however, we cannot construct it on any alleged, strong gnoseological access to the true nature of things or their 'essences'.<sup>62</sup> The *θεωρία* that appears to emerge from Sextus' pages, against the background of ancient medical empiricism, rather derives from acts of observation or empirical accounts that are repeated, and thus fixed in a sort of pragmatic 'memory store'. This implies the need to investigate and show only those connections that are backed up by constant observation, most probably implicitly supported by a certain trust in the regularity of the course of nature.<sup>63</sup> Such an attitude appears epistemologically conscious of its own limits, since from the outset it renounces any claim to know absolutely true objects or to have access to the necessary and eternal realm of Being. The range of action that it grants itself is very restricted, since it has only *τὰ φαινόμενα* as its object. Nonetheless, it is worth stressing again that this does not imply a denial of the possibility of producing and accepting precepts or rules (or, to be more precise, 'theorems'/*θεωρήματα*). In this way, a scenario of purposeful, not merely destructive Scepticism opens up; one that is capable of offering 'an Empiricist alternative to the Rationalist constructions'.<sup>64</sup>

This arguably 'poor' yet not cognitively unproductive form of Pyrrhonist *θεωρία* seems to provide a convenient solution for Sextus. Not only does he regard it as epistemologically valid according to the conceptual schemata of ancient medical empiricism, but he also maintains that it can be adopted in the sphere of ethics, since it is capable of providing guidelines for human conduct. Sextus' *θεωρία* operates in accordance with the 'common life' (*κοινὸς βίος*), whose constitutive elements or precepts, developed at the expense of much time and energy through the consolidation of our historical condition, seem impossible to ignore.

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<sup>62</sup> Nor, if we consider a suggestive hypothesis put forward by Thomas Bénatouïl, is it acceptable for *θεωρία* to assume the 'zetetic' and relativistic façade—possibly upheld by the Sceptical Academy—of a sort of contemplation that finds satisfaction in the sheer pleasure of research, albeit one confined to the realm of probability: see Bénatouïl (2007) 14.

<sup>63</sup> See Hankinson (1987) 346–347.

<sup>64</sup> Barnes (1988) 70. An alternative of this kind is perhaps close to the elaborate form of 'memorism' that Michael Frede attributes to Menodotus: see Frede (1990) 248–249; see also, in the same vein, Allen (2001) 113 e 141.

## VIII

If at this point we return to Hannah Arendt's comments quoted at the beginning of this paper, we will perhaps be justified in presenting a different picture, albeit one that is not—and could never have been—acceptable 'in the eyes of philosophers who spoke in the name of the thinking ego'. According to Sextus, there is no need for us to adhere to the latter's pessimistic view of contingency as something negative and to be shunned, turning a pure gaze of theoretical contemplation towards a remote realm higher than this base world of ours. What Sextus is offering is an alternative model of rationality, one that is empirically grounded. Through it we can serenely accept the necessary uniqueness of our mortal horizon and turn the contingency of our existence not into misery or (worse still) defeat, but into an opportunity and perhaps even an accomplishment.





## PART TWO

### EARLY IMPERIAL PLATONISM AND NEOPLATONISM



## LA CONTEMPLATION CHEZ PHILON D' ALEXANDRIE\*

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La lecture de l'ouvrage que Philon dédie à la vie contemplative (*De vita contemplativa*) peut décevoir celui qui cherche la nature de la contemplation en elle-même: il y est question d'hommes et de femmes qui, ayant délaissé tout ce qui a trait au corps et aux sens, vivent une vie spirituelle d'ascèse et de prière, de lecture et de réflexion, une vie alliant solitude retirée et communauté dans la simplicité. De fait, on a l'impression d'une sorte de focalisation uniquement externe, de vue surplombante: le lecteur voit les Thérapeutes vivre, se trouve renseigné sur leur emploi du temps, sur leur habitat, leurs repas, solitaires ou communautaires, toujours frugaux, etc., mais jamais il ne pénètre le secret des mouvements des âmes, tandis que le texte reste très allusif sur les objets de contemplation (l'Être – τοῦ ὄντος θεά, *De vit. cont.* 11 ou bien les « objets dignes de contemplation » – θεάς ἄξια, *De vit. cont.* 66) ou la méthode qui y conduit (la philosophie, la prière et la lecture allégorique – *De vit. cont.* 28). Le statut du texte explique évidemment dans une large mesure cette discrétion: on le classe parmi les ouvrages apologetiques, exotériques et destinés à un public non forcément juif, composé de païens hellénisés. Et tout se passe comme si l'on restait à la porte, sans pouvoir entrer plus avant dans la métaphysique philonienne, alors même qu'une allusion, qui tranche étonnamment avec la sérénité qui se dégage et du texte et de la communauté qu'il décrit, mentionne une sorte de réquisit tout à fait étrange de l'entrée dans cette même communauté:

Ceux qui se font serviteurs (οἱ δὲ ἐπὶ θεραπείαν ἰόντες) non du fait de l'habitude ni du fait de conseils ou d'exhortations, mais parce qu'ils ont été saisis par l'amour céleste (ἔρωτος [...] οὐρανοῦ), sont enthousiasmés à la manière d'un transport bachique et corybantique, jusqu'à ce qu'ils puissent voir l'objet désiré et absent (μέχρις ἂν τὸ ποθοῦμενον ἴδωσιν). Puis, estimant, à cause de leur désir passionné d'une vie immortelle et bienheureuse (διὰ τὸν τῆς ἀθανάτου καὶ μακαρίας ζωῆς ἔμπερον), qu'ils ont déjà accompli cette vie mortelle, ils laissent leurs biens à leurs fils, à leurs filles, et aux autres proches<sup>1</sup>.

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\* Je voudrais remercier Thomas Bénatouïl et Mauro Bonazzi pour leur accueil et m'avoir donné l'occasion de travailler sur Philon, ainsi que Francesca Calabi pour ses conseils et Carlos Lévy pour ses encouragements.

<sup>1</sup> *De vit. cont.* 12–13.

Les Thérapeutes – les serviteurs, ceux qui prennent soin de l'âme comme de Dieu (§ 2) intègrent la communauté après avoir été mus par une sorte d'ivresse divine dans laquelle ils ne s'appartiennent plus véritablement. Le registre du désir se trouve amplement couvert, à tel point que la traduction s'en trouve compliquée: une érotique divine (ἔρως ουράνιος), le désir nostalgique de ce qui manque (πόθος) et le désir passionné (ἔμερος)<sup>2</sup>. Par delà l'évident écho platonicien dans le *Phèdre*, on peut comprendre à la fois le caractère toujours exceptionnel de la contemplation (elle n'est pas le fait d'une habitude, et personne d'autre que Dieu ne peut finalement la provoquer), son attrait définitif (le Thérapeute quitte tout bien et toute attache pour une nouvelle vie et de nouveaux liens) et sa fin (la vie bienheureuse dans la proximité avec Dieu), tandis qu'elle implique une modalité spécifique de l'être: le contemplatif (ce terme n'implique aucunement que la contemplation soit continue), en quittant tout ce qui le liait au monde (biens, proches et lieux) s'ordonne entièrement à son désir, celui-là même qu'il a découvert avant d'entrer dans la communauté. De fait, le titre de l'ouvrage (περὶ βίου θεωρητικοῦ ἢ ἱκετῶν) précise cette modalité du désir: le contemplatif, le serviteur ou celui qui prend soin, se fait «suppliant»<sup>3</sup>.

Après avoir analysé d'abord le genre de vie qu'elle suppose, c'est cette caractéristique que je voudrais approfondir en seconde partie, tant elle paraît à la fois paradoxale et évidente, paradoxale dans le contexte d'une philosophie à l'orée du médio-platonisme, où l'on pourrait s'attendre à ce que la contemplation amène celui qui s'y adonne à une sorte d'*homoiôsis* avec ce qu'il contemple, mais évidente dans le contexte d'une pratique de lecture de la Bible, où la foi en la transcendance implique le manque et une position du croyant comme serviteur de son Dieu qui le dépasse.

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<sup>2</sup> On retrouve là rassemblés trois éléments que les stoïciens ont définis par différences: cf. *SVF* 3.395 (Stob. *Anth.* 2.91.10): «L'ἔρως est l'élan (ἐπιβολή) pour se faire un ami à travers la beauté qu'il manifeste; le πόθος est le désir (ἐπιθυμία) de l'amant absent; l'ἔμερος est le désir (ἐπιθυμία) de la compagnie d'un ami absent». Philon ne fait évidemment pas mention ici d'une quelconque ἐπιθυμία. Si toutefois la comparaison a quelque justesse, on peut en déduire que la beauté divine impulse la contemplation, tandis que Dieu est l'objet absent de la contemplation et la vie contemplative une vie en compagnie de ce Dieu absent. Le Boulluec (1998), tout en insistant sur la distinction entre ἐπιθυμία et ἔμερος, rapproche peut-être problématiquement ce passage d'une «τρυφή de l'âme».

<sup>3</sup> Nikiprowetzky (1963), cité dans l'édition 1996. Cette référence est, on le verra, fondamentale pour la présente étude. Si la condition de suppliant devient la vocation de tout le peuple d'Israël, les Léuites en forment le type (p. 29) selon lequel la communauté des Thérapeutes règle sa vie (p. 34).

## I

La situation de l'ouvrage (περὶ ἀρετῶν τὸ τέταρτον) montre qu'il faisait partie d'un ensemble plus vaste et la première phrase nous permet de conjecturer que la troisième partie, perdue, de celui-ci était consacrée à la vie active: Philon parle en effet d'un traité sur les Esséniens « qui ont consacré à la vie active leur zèle et leurs efforts ». De fait, cet ordre dans le traitement des deux vies semble cohérent avec le classement qu'on peut tirer du *De fuga*.

À de telles personnes, disons: recherchez-vous la vie sans relation (ἄμικτον), asociale (ἀκοινωνητον), misanthrope (μονότροπον) et solitaire (μονωτικόν)? Car quelle preuve avez-vous auparavant donnée de qualités en société? Renoncez-vous au gain d'argent? Engagés dans des affaires (χρηματισταί), avez-vous voulu pratiquer la justice? Feignant de ne tenir aucun compte des plaisirs du ventre et des parties sous le ventre, lorsque vous aviez en abondance de quoi vous y vautrer, avez-vous gardé la mesure? Méprisez-vous votre réputation? Lorsque vous avez obtenu des marques d'honneur, vous êtes-vous exercés à la modestie? Vous, vous vous moquez de la politique (πολιτεῖαν ἐγελάσατε): sans doute n'avez-vous pas compris combien la chose est avantageuse (χρήσιμον). D'abord, exercez-vous et pratiquez les affaires de la vie (τοῖς τοῦ βίου πράγμασιν), privées et publiques, et devenus politiques et administrateurs (οἰκονομικοί), grâce aux vertus soeurs, la vertu politique et la vertu économique, conformément à tant de ressources, migrez vers une vie différente et meilleure (κατὰ πολλὴν περισυσίαν τὴν εἰς ἕτερον καὶ ἀμείνω βίον ἀποικίαν στείλασθε). La vie pratique en effet vient avant la vie contemplative, une sorte de prélude à un combat plus achevé, et il est bon d'avoir d'abord mené cette lutte. Vous évitez ainsi l'accusation de nonchalance et d'oisiveté<sup>4</sup>.

La vie active n'a rien à voir évidemment avec la vie de plaisirs. Philon partage par ailleurs le même souci qu'Aristote de distinguer, au sein des formes d'acquisition, *oikonomia* et chrématistique<sup>5</sup>: il s'agit d'être juste en tant qu'administrateur de la maison et de la cité (contrairement à Aristote, Philon ne suppose pas de différence de nature entre les deux arts d'administrer)<sup>6</sup>. C'est bien à cet art unique de l'administration (maison ou cité), qui fait néanmoins appel à deux vertus distinctes quoique sœurs<sup>7</sup>, que renvoie la vie active – sans surprise, elle consiste surtout dans la politique,

<sup>4</sup> *De fuga* 35–36.

<sup>5</sup> Aristot. *Pol.* 1.9.1256b.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *De Jos.* 38–39.

<sup>7</sup> La source de cette distinction subtile mais réelle se trouve sans doute dans la pensée stoïcienne: si le sage peut être souverain en sa maison comme dans la cité, il n'empêche qu'il n'utilisera pas des mêmes théorèmes dans les deux cas.

par laquelle il s'agit de rendre la justice dans les liens sociaux: l'insistance sur le reproche d'une vie solitaire, aux bords de la misanthropie, montre clairement la sociabilité de l'être humain, même si, comme le *De vita contemplativa* le montre, ces liens peuvent très grandement varier selon, précisément, le genre de vie de la communauté. C'est pourquoi du reste Philon écrit expressément que malgré leur désir de solitude, les Thérapeutes ne sont pas misanthropes<sup>8</sup> et «aiment à vivre en communauté et veulent pouvoir se porter mutuellement secours»<sup>9</sup>. Le texte du *De fuga* semble instituer une précellence, à la fois temporelle et axiologique, entre les deux vies: d'abord la vie pratique (la vie politique), puis la vie théorétique, celle-ci valant plus que celle-là, celle-ci amenant plus de joie que celle-là (§ 37). Cet ordre ne va cependant pas de soi à la lecture d'autres passages de Philon qui bouleversent la hiérarchie que nous avons cru observer:

Mais puisque nous sommes composés d'une âme et d'un corps, il a assigné au corps ses travaux propres, à l'âme les travaux qui lui reviennent, et il a veillé à ce que tous deux s'assistent mutuellement: ainsi, quand le corps travaille, l'âme se repose, lorsqu'il fait une pause, elle se met à la tâche; et les deux vies les meilleures (οἱ ἄριστοι τῶν βίων), la vie contemplative et la vie active, se succèdent en se cédant l'une à l'autre la place, la vie active ayant en partage l'hexade pour le service du corps, la contemplative l'heptade en vue de la connaissance (ἐπιστήμην) et de la perfection de l'esprit (τελειότητα διανοίας)<sup>10</sup>.

La distribution des genres de vie selon le temps permet cependant de douter d'une stricte équivalence: la vie contemplative<sup>11</sup> correspond en effet au Shabbat qui couronne la semaine. Au corps le travail des six jours pendant lesquels Dieu a créé le monde, à l'âme le septième, jour de repos du corps, mais surtout jour saint, l'heptade étant appelée «accomplissement et parachèvement (συντέλεια καὶ παντέλεια)» au § 58. Au sein des deux vies les meilleures subsiste donc la hiérarchie qui confère plus de valeur à la vie contemplative. Il n'en reste pas moins que, même si l'une est meilleure que l'autre, les deux demeurent «les meilleures» et on ne peut que se demander par rapport à quel autre genre de vie. La classification des genres de vie n'a donc pas la simplicité à laquelle on aurait pu s'attendre et il faut compter

<sup>8</sup> *De vit. cont.* 20.

<sup>9</sup> *De vit. cont.* 24.

<sup>10</sup> *De spec. leg.* 2.64, trad. Daniel.

<sup>11</sup> Sur le Shabbat chez les Thérapeutes, voir Nikiprowetzky (1979), cité dans l'édition 1996, 216: «Les Thérapeutes étaient des sabbatants par excellence dont l'originalité, par rapport à d'autres variétés du judaïsme, tenait dans leur spiritualisation particulière de l'institution sabbatique, dans le style de l'*histoire du salut* où ils la faisaient entrer».

avec des variations qui définissent différemment la vie active. Cette distinction entre les deux genres de vie se révèle ainsi particulièrement problématique lorsqu'on aborde le problème pour les communautés historiques des Esséniens et des Thérapeutes<sup>12</sup> : on peut imaginer que ces communautés, en poursuivant le même but spirituel, n'accentuaient pas les mêmes exigences (il y a une part de service et d'activité chez les Thérapeutes comme une part de contemplation chez les Esséniens) tandis que les deux communautés montrent en même temps à quel point vie pratique et vie théorique sont effectivement les meilleures, parce qu'elles ont pu les transcender vers ce que chacune a de plus pur. La référence au *De vita Mosis* 1.48, qui établit une stricte équivalence entre vie active et vie contemplative peut nous permettre dans un premier temps d'éviter la recherche d'un, ou plusieurs, troisième terme. Il est dit en effet que Moïse, ayant fui la colère de Pharaon après le meurtre de l'Égyptien, se retire en Arabie pour s'exercer aux deux vies les meilleures (πρὸς τοὺς ἀρίστους βίους) et diriger ses efforts vers une unique fin, la droite raison de la nature, source et principe de la vertu (ἀρχή τε καὶ πηγὴ, deux termes qui par ailleurs consacrent une ambiguïté à laquelle nous aurons affaire puisque ce mélange entre raison et nature détermine une hésitation entre les limites de l'immanence – πηγὴ et transcendance – ἀρχή). Or, Moïse, ἄσπετος, est tout à la fois le parfait politique et le parfait contemplatif, le sage vrai roi et dieu. Le *Legum allegoriae*, en assimilant la vertu à l'art de la vie, montre ainsi que comme existent des arts pratiques et des arts théoriques, la vertu est tout à la fois théorique (en tant que les trois parties de la philosophie mènent à elle) et pratique (« car la vertu est l'art de la vie tout entière, qui comprend toutes les actions »)<sup>13</sup>. Que les exemples d'arts pratiques recouvrent tout ce qu'on pourrait appeler arts manuels (art de l'architecte, du forgeron) ne doit pas nous faire penser à une mise à l'écart de la politique : la supériorité de l'art de la vie implique la supériorité de ses composantes théorique et pratique. En revanche, un paragraphe du *De praemiis et poenis* peut nous faire penser à cette évacuation :

Nous avons à étudier ces semailles essentielles réalisées par le Créateur dans le terroir des vertus qu'est l'âme raisonnable. Or, la première qu'elle reçoit, c'est l'espérance, la source des genres de vie (ἡ πηγὴ τῶν βιῶν). C'est en effet dans l'espoir de profit que le négociant (ὁ χρηματιστής) met en oeuvre toutes

<sup>12</sup> Pour un état de la question, cf. Riaud (1987) 1241–1264 notamment et Nikiprowetzky (1966).

<sup>13</sup> *Leg. Alleg.* 1, 57.

sortes d'expédients et par l'espoir d'une heureuse navigation que l'armateur traverse les vastes océans, c'est dans l'espérance de la gloire que l'ambitieux (ὁ φιλότιμος) lui aussi embrasse la politique et l'administration des affaires publiques, c'est dans l'espérance des prix et des couronnes qu'à leur tour les champions de la culture physique affrontent les compétitions; l'espérance de la béatitude stimule également les zéloteurs de la vertu pour la philosophie dans l'idée qu'elle les mettra à même de saisir la nature des choses et d'agir conformément à elle pour la perfection des genres de vie, la contemplative et l'active, puisqu'on est heureux aussitôt qu'on les atteint<sup>14</sup>.

Doit-on voir là les différents genres de vie, dont l'espérance est le germe? La vie de *chrematistes*, celle du navigateur, la vie politique (mais notons que l'économique n'est pas mentionnée), la vie de l'athlète sportif, enfin, la vie philosophique, tout à la fois théorique et pratique. Dès lors, ces deux derniers genres de vie, unis en l'excellence de la vertu, s'opposent, par cette excellence, aux autres, dont la politique, qui demeure le fait de la gloriole et de l'ambition. C'est là tout le portrait de Joseph dans une grande partie du livre 2 du *De somniis*, portrait bariolé d'un politique cloué au poteau des circonstances et divaguant à leur gré.

Je n'entrerai pas beaucoup plus avant dans une des difficultés célèbres de la pensée philonienne<sup>15</sup>: quel est le statut de Joseph, et par là même du politique, aux prises avec les inconstances et l'opinion toujours diverses de la foule, inconstant lui-même et épris de gloire, entre le feu nourri des critiques développées dans le *De somniis* et l'apologie du *De Iosepho*? Je ne ferai qu'esquisser ici deux pistes pour réduire ce qui me semble un vrai problème mais une fausse contradiction. D'une part, il me semble qu'il y a une différence fondamentale de méthodologie allégorique entre les deux traités. Les personnages des frères de Joseph, pour ne prendre qu'un exemple, apparaissent tour à tour comme οἱ φρονήσεως ἀσχεταί<sup>16</sup> et des hommes pris par le φθόνος fratricide et la colère<sup>17</sup>, sans toutefois que ces deux figures ne se contredisent. Dans un cas, l'interprétation porte uniquement sur les

<sup>14</sup> *De praem.* 10–11.

<sup>15</sup> On trouve un rapide état bibliographique de l'ambiguïté du personnage de Joseph dans Calabi (1988) 13 n. 24. Il reste que Joseph homme politique dans les cités où les lois s'ajoutent à la loi naturelle, reste aussi l'interprète de la loi de Dieu, et rejoint ainsi le parfait politique dans une commune inspiration par Dieu (p. 12). Barraclough (1984) 501–503 montre que le *De Iosepho* reprend la conception générale que se fait Philon de la pratique politique, lorsque le *De somniis* critique, via l'allégorie, une pratique politique dévoyée dans les mœurs romaines, que Flaccus incarnerait.

<sup>16</sup> *De somn.* 2.65.

<sup>17</sup> *De Ioseph.* 5.



rêves et, par l'originalité de ce matériau, peut se passer du sens littéral et de l'horizon de l'histoire, dans l'autre, l'interprétation s'opère à l'aune de cet horizon et donc de la vertu de Joseph (de même n'est-il pas fait mention, dans le *De somniis* ni de l'interprétation par Joseph des rêves de l'échanson et du panetier ni de la profonde différence entre leurs deux destins). En somme, le rêve dans cet ouvrage est analysé comme processus psychologique, ici spécifiquement d'Égyptiens ou apparentés, lorsqu'il est compris comme matériau de la prophétie dans le *De Iosepho*. D'autre part, il s'agit là de donner à la politique sa place en soulignant et sa vertu et ses risques. Les deux traités, majorant ou minorant tel aspect ne dessinent pas précisément la même figure du politique : lorsque le *De somniis* désigne le politique comme conseiller du roi, le *De Iosepho* le dessine vice-roi, ou roi exécutif. Outre qu'il s'agit là d'une critique claire de la distinction stoïcienne des genres de vie entre vie royale, vie politique et vie intellectuelle<sup>18</sup> au profit d'une autre classification en cours dans le portique entre vie contemplative, vie pratique et vie rationnelle<sup>19</sup> (cette dernière embrassant et rehaussant dans sa supériorité les deux autres), on devine par ailleurs que le politique pour Philon déborde le champ de la seule cité pour apparaître comme le garant d'une même souveraineté : celle d'une cité comme celle de la cité universelle (celle-ci fondant celle-là, par-delà les ajouts à la loi de Moïse), tirée de la seule loi divine. En somme, le politique-roi est loi vivante comme le furent les Patriarches et Moïse<sup>20</sup>, lorsque le conseiller subit la loi d'un autre qui n'est pas son Dieu. On retrouve cette exigence d'une vie parfaite et parfaitement ordonnancée à la loi divine à la fin du *De vita contemplativa* :

J'ai fini au sujet des Thérapeutes, qui ont embrassé la contemplation de la nature (θεωρίαν [...] φύσεως) et de ce qu'elle contient (τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ), qui ne vivent que par l'âme seule, qui sont citoyens du ciel et de l'univers (οὐρανοῦ καὶ κόσμου πολιτῶν), véritablement unis (συσταθέντων) au Père et Créateur de toutes choses, grâce à leur vertu qui leur a procuré le don le plus précieux pour un homme bon : l'amitié de Dieu, et qui mène rapidement au comble de la félicité<sup>21</sup>.

Je retiendrai de ce texte, d'une part l'élargissement fort peu classique d'une citoyenneté qui n'est plus seulement *du monde*, contrairement à ce à quoi les textes hellénistiques (cyniques et stoïciens surtout, même si Socrate

<sup>18</sup> SVF 3.686.

<sup>19</sup> Diog. Laert. 7.130 = SVF 3.687.

<sup>20</sup> *De Mos.* 1.162 ; *De Abr.* 5 ; cf. aussi, Bonazzi 151–152.

<sup>21</sup> *De vit. cont.* 90.

passe – peu vraisemblablement – pour l’origine de la formule) nous avaient habitués. Que le contemplatif soit aussi citoyen du ciel souligne me semble-t-il l’ambivalence du politique et de son art dans une cité ordinaire, mais indique aussi qu’il s’agit là d’une conception qui à la fois partage et va à rebours de la conception classique de la citoyenneté cosmique. Elle la partage, puisque le contemplatif est de fait citoyen du monde, et donc partout chez lui, mais elle va à rebours parce que dans le même temps, la contemplation signifie toujours un exil plus profond<sup>22</sup>, celui de l’âme qui s’arrache aux sens (Joseph est ainsi le citoyen du corps)<sup>23</sup>, mais aussi celui du sage qui s’éloigne du monde – au fond, la question de la situation géographique de la communauté des Thérapeutes s’avère secondaire : elle n’a pas de lieu, parce que cette question du lieu se trouve profondément remaniée.

## II

Une dernière classification philonienne doit nous intéresser : il ne s’agit pas tant de « genres de vie – βίος » que de « sortes de vie – ζωή », dont une seule intéresse la vie de l’homme, celle que le texte dénomme « vie mixte » :

Il existe trois sortes de vie (ζωῆς δὲ τριττὸν γένος) : l’une tournée vers Dieu ; l’autre vers le monde du devenir ; la troisième entre les deux, mélange des deux premières (μικτὸν ἀμφοῖν). La sorte de vie tournée vers Dieu ne descend pas vers nous, elle ne vient pas dans les nécessités corporelles ; la sorte de vie tournée vers le monde du devenir ne monte absolument pas vers le haut et ne cherche même pas à monter, mais en s’enfonçant dans le creux de l’Hadès, elle se réjouit de cette vie qui n’est pas une vie (τῷ ἀβιώτῳ βίῳ χαίρει). La sorte de vie mixte, si elle est souvent inspirée de Dieu et portée par Dieu parce qu’elle est menée par l’ordre le meilleur, souvent aussi elle dévie, parce qu’elle est tirée en sens contraire par l’ordre mauvais. Quand c’est la portion de vie supérieure (ἡ τῆς κρείττονος ζωῆς μοῖρα) qui l’emporte par son poids sur tout l’ensemble, comme sur le plateau d’une balance, la masse de la vie contraire se trouve entraînée par ce mouvement si bien que sa charge devient tout à fait légère<sup>24</sup>.

Ζωή est le genre commun, tandis qu’on peut tenter de comprendre la distinction entre ζωή et βίος par la caractérisation de la vie tournée vers le

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Barraclough (1984) 538–542.

<sup>23</sup> *De somn.* 1.78.

<sup>24</sup> *Heres* 45–46. Graffigna (2003) 136, rapproche la vie mixte de l’équilibre précaire des attelages du *Phaedr.* 247a–b.

monde du devenir: τῷ ἀβιώτῳ βίῳ, «une vie qui n'est pas une vie». Comme si cette vie ne répondait pas aux réquisits fondamentaux du βίος, ce qui nous permettrait de dire que le mot réfère ici à une vie spécifiquement humaine: la vie invivable selon les sens devient vivable si elle est pour ainsi dire contrebalancée par la ζωή supérieure, celle tournée vers Dieu; la vie (βίος) humaine ne se vit pleinement que soutenue de la vie (ζωή) tournée vers Dieu. Pour délicate à comprendre qu'elle soit, cette classification a cependant l'intérêt de montrer que l'homme se trouve précisément pris entre une transcendance qu'il ne peut atteindre et une vie sensuelle qu'il risque bien de préférer. L'exercice de la contemplation engage alors précisément la dynamique susceptible de transformer la vie invivable des sens en vie véritable: c'est là toute l'ambivalence de la vie mixte, tiraillée entre les nécessités d'un corps qui peuvent devenir tyranniques ou bien se trouver circonscrites, portées pour ainsi dire dans un élan supérieur.

Alléger le corps et, pour cela, s'affranchir des sens, tel est bien le projet des Thérapeutes. Tout leur soin consiste en une extirpation dans l'âme des échos charnels du corps, sans pour autant mener à un affranchissement total. Ainsi les Thérapeutes réduisent-ils les soins du corps au minimum – ne mangeant que la nuit, allant jusqu'à oublier de se nourrir trois jours durant tant leur étude retient leur attention, et, pour le septième jour, prenant en commun pour repas de fête du pain, du sel agrémenté d'hysope et d'eau claire<sup>25</sup>. Ils incarnent ainsi parfaitement cet exil du corps que Philon décrit dans le texte que nous venons de lire, où le poids d'une âme incorporelle et des soins qui lui sont prodigués l'emporte sur le poids du corps, tandis que le *De Iosepho* décrit la possibilité de l'inverse: que les sensations «entraînent avec elles l'âme tout entière et l'empêchent ainsi de se tenir droite»<sup>26</sup>.

Ainsi, dans le *De Abrahamo*, lit-on cette migration d'une âme hors des sens: la première étape (la migration d'Abraham quittant sa Chaldée natale et tous ses proches) correspond allégoriquement au fait de quitter la science trompeuse de l'astronomie, qui célèbre non le créateur mais les créatures<sup>27</sup> pour prendre conscience, en allant vers Haran (la caverne), le lieu de la science sensible, de l'existence d'un créateur. En d'autres termes, la migration a lieu du pays où l'âme est esclave des phénomènes naturels, dont elle ne voit pas qu'ils n'ont en eux-mêmes aucune consistance:

<sup>25</sup> *Heres* 37–38.

<sup>26</sup> *De Ios.* 142.

<sup>27</sup> *De Abr.* 68sqq.

Nourri dans cette doctrine, Abraham chaldaïsa (χαλδαΐσας) un long moment. Puis, comme après un profond sommeil (ἐκ βαθέος ὕπνου), il ouvrit l'oeil de l'âme (διοίξας τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ὄμμα) et commençant à voir le pur éclat du jour au lieu de l'ombre profonde, il s'attacha à la lumière et observa ce qu'il n'avait pas vu auparavant, un conducteur et un pilote préposé au monde (τοῦ κόσμου τινὰ ἡνίοχον καὶ κυβερνήτην), assurant la direction de son propre ouvrage, assurant la surveillance et la protection de toutes ses parties qui sont dignes de la sollicitude divine<sup>28</sup>.

Chaldaïser revient en somme à demeurer dans l'imaginaire d'un savoir qui en fantasmant une maîtrise des phénomènes qui le dépassent (donner des bornes au ciel, dit le *De somniis* 1.54) vit dans le déni de ce qu'est une vie humaine. Aussi est-il urgent de descendre dans la caverne d'Haran pour revenir d'abord aux sens: il faut d'abord ouvrir les yeux avant de découvrir le regard (ὄμμα) de l'âme, ce regard dépassant la vision sensible jusqu'à l'obscurcir («adonne-toi à la philosophie la plus nécessaire et la plus convenable à l'homme, en recherchant ce qu'est la vue, l'ouïe le goût, le toucher et comment chacun d'eux fonctionne»)<sup>29</sup>; mais aussi revenir à l'examen de soi-même:

Mais avant d'avoir procédé à une inspection exhaustive de ta propre demeure (πρὶν δὲ τὸν ἴδιον οἶκον καλῶς ἐπεσκέφθαι), n'est-ce pas le comble de la folie (οὐχ ὑπερβολὴ μανίας) que d'entreprendre une étude approfondie du tout (τὸν τοῦ παντός ἐξετάζειν)? Et il y a une tâche plus importante que je ne t'ai pas encore indiquée: examine ton âme et cette intelligence (τὴν σαυτοῦ ψυχὴν ἰδεῖν καὶ τὸν νοῦν) dont tu es si fier, car la comprendre (καταλαβεῖν) tu ne le pourras jamais<sup>30</sup>.

On assiste dès lors à Haran à une triple enquête (le monde, le corps, le moi) et à une triple découverte, sur fond de nuit d'abord d'une certaine intelligence, puis des sens: le monde n'est pas le tout et sa lumière cache aux sens à la fois son créateur et les objets dignes de contemplation<sup>31</sup>, la connaissance sensible se révèle à la fois nécessaire et insuffisante, et le moi, l'âme qui se scrute elle-même (c'est le γνῶθι σαυτὸν socratique, c'est, dans la Bible, Tharé, le père d'Abraham qui choisit de demeurer à Haran), ouvre un espace à l'objet de son désir: le «connais-toi toi-même» aboutit

<sup>28</sup> *De Abr.* 70.

<sup>29</sup> *De somn.* 1.55.

<sup>30</sup> *De somn.* 1.56.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Leg. Alleg.* 2.99: un tel raisonnement qui part de la contemplation du monde pour aboutir à la conclusion qu'il existe un créateur revient à comprendre «Dieu par son ombre (διὰ σκιάς τὸν θεόν καταλαμβάνουσι) et l'ouvrier par ses oeuvres».

à la reconnaissance de son propre néant (οὐδένεια)<sup>32</sup>. Pour cela cependant, il faut être passé par cette première nuit non seulement des sens mais d'une certaine intelligence, dont on se loue avec fierté et qui n'est qu'un cache misère – aussi faut-il retrouver, par-delà l'imaginaire de l'esprit, cette misère d'un homme qui se découvre sans son Dieu et se met à sa recherche : l'examen de soi-même pourrait avoir, comme pour Tharé, sa fin en soi, mais s'ajoute alors pour Abraham une nouvelle modalité psychologique, qui, prenant le pas sur la simple volonté de savoir, ouvre le champ du désir :

Lorsqu'en effet il se connaissait le mieux (μάλιστα ἔγνω), c'est alors qu'il s'éloignait le plus de la connaissance de lui-même (τότε μάλιστα ἀπέγνω), afin d'atteindre à une connaissance de plus en plus rigoureuse (ἀκριβή γνῶσιν) de Celui qui est la vérité. Car il en va ainsi : celui qui se comprend (ὁ [...] καταλαβών) le plus, celui-là s'éloigne le plus de la connaissance de lui-même, ayant une vue lucide (προλαβών) du néant (οὐδένειαν) absolu de la créature (τοῦ γενητοῦ); et celui qui s'éloigne de la connaissance de lui-même connaît celui qui est (γινώσκει τὸν ὄντα)<sup>33</sup>.

Le retournement du critère de la *katalepsis*, source dans le stoïcisme de la prolepse, s'appuie sur la faiblesse de celle-ci dans la force même qu'elle pouvait afficher : plus l'on connaît, moins l'on connaît, ou plutôt, plus l'on croit saisir le soi, moins on le saisit tout en connaissant enfin l'être véritable, au prix d'une reconnaissance en soi-même de la créature (Philon joue la prolepse contre la *katalepsis* et en change donc considérablement le sens). Un tel raisonnement, tout en ne laissant aucune prise au moindre scepticisme (on atteint bien une connaissance et un objet de connaissance) détourne le sens classique de l'examen de soi : se cherchant on trouve l'autre. Cherchant un objet d'étude, on trouve l'objet de la contemplation.

<sup>32</sup> Nikiprowetzky (1963) 27 : « Il est très important de remarquer que c'est au moment où Abraham semble s'être réduit à néant (le désert) qu'il est comblé du don le plus grand et qu'il voit Dieu. C'est là une expérience typique du suppliant (...). Abraham voit Dieu au moment où il a le sentiment de son néant (οὐδένεια) ».

<sup>33</sup> *De somn.* 1.59. Voir Siegert (1998) 187 qui propose la traduction du *De deo* de Philon (chapitre 2) : « De ceux dont toute l'âme a été remplie comme de la lumière de midi, on peut dire à juste titre : *Quand il leva les yeux, il vit avec ses yeux* (*Gn.* 18.2). Ceux qui ont la pratique de la très sainte Écriture contemplent le CONNAIS-TOI TOI-MÊME. Renonçant au bonheur humain—si quelqu'un a dès le début eu part à la correction des mœurs—ils ouvrent les yeux, voient et contemplent ce qui plane en haut et scrutent la nature divine ».

## III

Il est temps de sortir d'Haran et d'aller au désert, afin de se mettre en état de contempler enfin les objets qui le méritent. Si le désert est le lieu où, par la privation, les nécessités des sens ne se font que plus sentir, il est aussi ce lieu où un renouveau est possible; l'ambiguïté de la figure du désert<sup>34</sup> fait écho à l'ambivalence de la vie mixte: n'est-ce pas au désert que l'on risque le plus sa vie? N'est-ce pas en ce lieu que les nécessités du corps deviennent, par le manque, criantes et tyranniques? Si l'exil permet sans doute la sortie de l'esclavage des sens, le désert constitue le lieu de la tentation du retour: les Hébreux ne récriminaient-ils pas devant Moïse et ne regrettaient-ils pas, au désert, l'Égypte et l'esclavage?<sup>35</sup> Mais, comme le montre F. Calabi, le désert est aussi le lieu où Dieu opère des prodiges pour son peuple (parfois contre lui), lieu où tout vient de Dieu, même ce qui satisfait les sens: est ainsi démontrée pour ainsi dire la misère, l'inanité, de l'homme sans Dieu, qui lui vient en aide par sa loi<sup>36</sup>. Enfin, la traversée du désert permet d'y trouver l'espace de l'âme, de son repos dans la confiance et d'un rapport à l'autre pacifié par la loi. Tel est le parcours que nous nous proposons à présent: après le moment de l'exil vient celui de la découverte du désert, dans les difficultés de l'ascèse, les doutes du manque et la paix de la contemplation.

C'est ainsi dans un lieu au sortir de la ville qu'Abraham fit le rêve d'une échelle<sup>37</sup> solidement fichée en terre et montant jusqu'au ciel: des anges en montaient et descendaient les barreaux. Le Seigneur, dit la *Genèse*, était fermement établi sur cette échelle. Le rêve reçoit bien entendu de la part de Philon une interprétation allégorique, développée dans le *De somniis*, qui, se fondant sur deux sens, permet de comprendre le lien entre contemplation et allégorie. L'échelle fait d'abord l'objet d'une interprétation cosmologique: l'analogon de l'échelle est l'air. Puis l'interprétation se fait anthropologique, et l'analogon est l'âme:

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<sup>34</sup> Nikiprowetzky (1989), cité dans l'édition 1996, 296, 300: le thème du désert se révèle dialectique, puisque le désert est à la fois un «lieu de terreur et d'horreur», «le désert immense, profond dont la stérilité absolue jette l'âme dans la dépression et le désespoir», mais aussi le lieu du don de la loi à Moïse, lieu inscrit dans le projet divin du salut.

<sup>35</sup> Calabi (2008a) 12–15 insiste sur le fait qu'au désert se trouvent scorpions et serpents, qui par leurs morsures figurent la tentation du retour à la vie des sens et font regretter l'exil: l'exil impose cette expérience du manque au désert, lieu de la nostalgie du corps après son abandon.

<sup>36</sup> Calabi (2008a) 18.

<sup>37</sup> Gn. 28.12–13.

Voilà ce qu'on appelle symboliquement l'échelle, pour ce qui est du monde; mais pour ce qui est de l'homme, notre examen nous fera découvrir que c'est l'âme. Sa base est la connaissance sensible qui est pour ainsi dire ce qu'il y a de terrestre en elle, et son sommet, qui en serait comme l'élément céleste, c'est l'esprit très pur (ὁ καθαρῶτατος νοῦς). Sur toute son étendue, montent et descendent sans interruption les paroles divines (οἱ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγοι): quand elles montent, elles entraînent l'âme avec elle vers le haut, rompant ses liens avec tout ce qui est soumis à la mort et lui donnant à contempler ce qui seul mérite de l'être; quand elles descendent, elles ne la font pas chuter – car Dieu et sa parole ne peuvent nuire, mais par amour pour les hommes et compassion pour notre espèce, elles acceptent de descendre à notre secours comme nos alliées, pour donner, par une inspiration salvatrice, une vie nouvelle à l'âme<sup>38</sup>.

Le système d'analogies en permet une autre, entre l'âme et le κόσμος: ainsi, plus tard dans le texte, Philon montrera-t-il que Dieu a deux sanctuaires, le *kosmos* et l'âme rationnelle (λογικὴ ψυχή), âme d'abord de l'Homme véritable (celui créé à l'image de Dieu), dont le fidèle s'efforce lui-même d'être une imitation<sup>39</sup>. Mais l'analogie, comme toute communauté de rapports, ne signifie aucunement équivalence. De fait, en se fondant sur une conception symbolique du langage (les signes échouent, dans la lecture littérale, à épuiser un sens qui, s'il ne se refuse pas, sature au contraire le verset)<sup>40</sup> qui ne donne à l'interprétation d'autre outil fondamental que l'analogie, Philon institue certes des communautés de rapports mais par lesquelles se mesure l'incommensurabilité du sens. Si l'échelle est au lieu du rêve ce que l'air est au monde, si cette même échelle est au rêve ce que l'âme est à l'homme, l'air est sans doute au monde ce que l'âme est à l'homme à ceci près que les deux ordres ne peuvent se rapprocher précisément qu'au détour d'une telle analogie. Si l'on risquait une mise en abyme du texte précédemment cité, on pourrait dire que la lecture allégorique gravit l'échelle niveau par niveau, passant d'un sens à un autre, ce que, du reste, l'incessant mouvement ascendant et descendant des paroles divines peut suggérer. En somme, c'est dans la lecture allégorique que se joue la contemplation, que s'atteint l'objet contemplé (ainsi que la vie d'étude des Thérapeutes le laissait prévoir). Le texte, tissu divin, recèle tout à la fois la vérité du monde et

<sup>38</sup> *De somn.* 1.146–147.

<sup>39</sup> *De somn.* 1.215.

<sup>40</sup> On peut proposer deux exemples: *Leg. Alleg.* 2.19, célèbre passage «mythique» pour Philon de la création de la femme à partir de la côte d'Adam; *De somn.* 1.102, où Philon accuse ces «professeurs» qui tiennent au sens littéral à propos du manteau laissé en gage et qui doit être restitué avant le soir (*Ex.* 22.27): on se perd dans tellement de méandres du sens qu'il faut recourir à l'analogie.

celle de l'âme, et sa lecture n'est autre chose que la contemplation – d'où une expression du *De Abrahamo*, à propos de l'allégorie des trois visiteurs d'Abraham, trois visages par lesquels Dieu se donne à voir selon l'âme qui le reçoit: ἡ ἐν ἀλληγορίᾳ θεωρίᾳ. L'incompréhensible est conçu à partir du compris (le sens littéral, qui se révèle d'une façon ou d'une autre défaillant), comme l'intelligible est conçu à partir du sensible, lui-même défaillant:

[...] Le monde composé des Idées au sein de Celui qui a été élu grâce aux libéralités divines, le monde intelligible ne peut être atteint que si l'on quitte le monde sensible et visible. Car il n'est possible de se représenter aucune des réalités incorporelles autrement qu'à partir des corps [...]. C'est donc analogiquement que le monde intelligible est conçu à partir du sensible qui en est en quelque sorte la porte. De même en effet que ceux qui veulent (βουλόμενοι) visiter nos cités y pénètrent par des portes, de même ceux qui veulent appréhender (καλαβεῖν ἐθέλουσιν) le monde invisible y sont introduits par la représentation du monde visible (ὑπὸ τῆς τοῦ ὁρατοῦ φαντασίας)<sup>41</sup>.

Philon met à profit la tension entre immanence du sensible et transcendance de l'Idée pour forger avec la « porte » une nouvelle figure de la limite (nous avons déjà rencontré la figure de la source). Le sensible se tient au seuil de l'intelligible, mais il faut noter qu'une fois franchi ce seuil, il ne saurait plus être question de lui (c'est en ce sens que les premières lignes rappellent l'exigence de quitter le sensible). L'Idée et le sensible n'ont rien en commun, et ce qui permet l'analogie n'est pas tant une communauté de rapports entre sensible et intelligible qu'un vouloir (βουλόμενοι / ἐθέλουσιν) premier de celui qui veut passer d'un monde à l'autre et découvre dans le premier l'ombre portée du second. De manière étrange, la φαντασία du monde visible est garante de la κατάληψις du monde invisible, alors même que cette φαντασία est obscure (contrairement à l'étymologie stoïcienne du terme): c'est précisément parce que la représentation du monde sensible s'obscurcit que se lève la lumière intelligible pour qui veut dépasser les sens. On passe alors à la vue de la « partie maîtresse de l'âme », qui, dit le *De Abrahamo*, « l'emporte sur toutes les autres facultés qui l'accompagnent. Elle est sagesse, qui est vue de l'intelligence (αὕτη ἐστὶ φρόνησις ὅψις οὖσα διανοίας) »<sup>42</sup>.

Il nous reste à tenter de nous faire une idée de cette sagesse. De ce qu'elle voit (le monde intelligible), il est difficile d'en donner une appréhension autrement que par l'allégorie, puisque tout cela échappe aux sens:

<sup>41</sup> *De somn.* 1.187–188 et Siegert (1998), chapitre 1 de sa traduction du *De deo*, p. 187 et le commentaire p. 191.

<sup>42</sup> *De Abr.* 57.



Lorsque cette lumière brille pour l'intelligence, les lumières secondaires des mots s'évanouissent; quant aux emplacements des sens, c'est une ombre épaisse qui les recouvre. Mais quand cette lumière s'en va, mots et sensations connaissent aussitôt un lever et une aurore<sup>43</sup>.

Celui qui voit l'intelligible, dès lors, peut atteindre la fin de la vertu, puisqu'il la voit dans sa réalité incorporelle. Philon la formule dans le *De fuga et inventione*<sup>44</sup> en suivant Platon : se rendre semblable au dieu, autant que possible, ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δύνατον<sup>45</sup>. On trouve une formule plus philonienne dans le *De Abrahamo* :

Car celui qui contemple (θεώμενος) l'ordre de la nature (τὴν ἐν τῇ φύσει τάξιν) et la constitution (πολιτείαν), supérieure à toute description, dont jouit l'univers, apprend, sans que personne ne lui parle, à mener une vie loyale et pacifique (εὖνομον καὶ εἰρηνικὸν βίον), en se fixant comme but d'être semblable à ces beautés (τὴν τῶν καλῶν ἐξομοίωσιν)<sup>46</sup>.

Outre une nouvelle définition du genre de vie du contemplant, le texte nous montre que l'assimilation de l'âme à ses objets ne vaut que par ses conséquences éthiques. Encore cette assimilation, on l'a vu, ne va-t-elle pas de soi : le κατὰ τὸν δυνατὸν constitue la marque de la transcendance et les limites qu'elle impose. Il s'agit alors pour nous, en analysant rapidement ces limites, de comprendre comment la transformation morale en découle pourtant.

Moïse, le sage par excellence, entendant les accords de la musique du monde et dans la contemplation, put se passer de nourriture pendant quarante jours : par cette contemplation, il se fit incorporel (Μωυσὴν ἀσώματον γενόμενον)<sup>47</sup>. Cependant, c'est le même Moïse, rédacteur de la Loi, qui fait dire à Philon<sup>48</sup>, à partir de *Gn.* 32.32 :

Lorsque nous ne sommes plus capables de vivre dans la fréquentation (συνδιατρίβειν) des saintes idées (ταῖς ἱερωτάταις ἰδέαις), ces images immatérielles, et que nous prenons une autre direction pour changer de région, nous nous

<sup>43</sup> *De somn.* 1.72.

<sup>44</sup> *De fuga* 63.

<sup>45</sup> Voir Plat. *Theaet.* 176a–b.

<sup>46</sup> *De Abr.* 61.

<sup>47</sup> *De somn.* 1.36. Dillon (1998) 109 voit dans cette incorporité de Moïse à la fois un rapprochement avec le mythe des cigales du *Phèdre*, 258b–d et une manière figurative pour Philon de caractériser la contemplation : Moïse, pris par les accents divins de la musique des Sphères, est enflammé par le désir de la contemplation.

<sup>48</sup> Philon témoigne de cette expérience pour lui-même, dont l'âme, en pleine contemplation, est mordue par le serpent des passions : *Leg. Alleg.* 2.85.

aidons d'une lumière différente, celle de la connaissance sensible qui, au regard de la saine raison, est parfaitement assimilable à l'obscurité<sup>49</sup>.

De même, Isaac, le Rire, celui qui n'eut besoin ni d'éducation ni d'ascèse, mais a tiré de sa nature seule la vertu, « ne se dépouille pas : il est toujours nu et incorporel (γυμνός ἐστι καὶ ἀσώματος), car ordre lui a été donné de ne pas descendre en Égypte, c'est-à-dire dans le corps »<sup>50</sup>. Cependant, même pour ce dernier autodidacte « qui jamais ne s'éloigne de la foi en un Dieu qui reste opaque à son intelligence »<sup>51</sup>, la contemplation reste malaisée et la parole de Dieu est le seul recours pour retrouver la lumière. Deux problèmes se trouvent ici liés. Ce qu'on pourrait appeler « le poids du corps », qui fait que la contemplation ne dure pas (Moïse), et l'échec de l'intelligence humaine à comprendre le divin (Isaac), ces deux problèmes situent la place de l'être humain lui-même au seuil du monde sensible, seuil qu'il ne peut franchir de lui-même :

Quant à l'homme de bien (ἀστέιος), il est sur la limite (μεθόριος), à proprement parler ni dieu, ni homme, mais touchant aux extrêmes (τῶν ἄκρων ἐφαπτόμενον), à l'espèce mortelle par sa qualité d'homme, à l'espèce immortelle par la vertu<sup>52</sup>.

C'est que l'intelligence du sage, supérieure à celle des hommes, reste inférieure à celle de Dieu. Cette intelligence tire du reste cette supériorité de la reconnaissance sans réserve de son infériorité devant son créateur. C'est ainsi une âme boiteuse en effet, qui, « ayant atteint la limite même du bien », refuse de se laisser aller à l'orgueil et, acceptant l'engourdissement que lui a infligé la vertu comme l'a infligé l'ange à Jacob-Israël lors de sa lutte contre lui, se fait elle-même un croc-en-jambe pour tomber et se laisser vaincre par les ἀσώματα. Ἦττ'ἀσθαι δοκοῦσα νικηφορήσει<sup>53</sup> : elle tirera la victoire d'une soi-disant défaite. On se demande à vrai dire quelle est la fonction du croc-en-jambe : là où la blessure à la hanche eût parfaitement suffi pour faire comprendre que la gloire d'Israël n'est pas d'avoir gagné mais d'avoir lutté, se faire volontairement tomber pourrait encore laisser quelques traces d'un orgueil déplacé. Tel n'est sans doute pas le cas : tenir la position du suppliant signifie aussi veiller à ne pas chercher à s'élever en oubliant le néant de sa condition, quitte à s'humilier : se faire tomber de peur d'oublier sa blessure.

<sup>49</sup> *De somn.* 1.79.

<sup>50</sup> *Leg. Alleg.* 2.59.

<sup>51</sup> *De somn.* 1.68.

<sup>52</sup> *De somn.* 2.230.

<sup>53</sup> *De somn.* 1.130–131.

L'âme du sage est ainsi une âme boiteuse et une âme qui en a fini avec tout fantasma de maîtrise<sup>54</sup>. C'est le dernier point, le plus essentiel sans doute : comme la lecture allégorique ne mène pas à une connaissance ni à une compréhension du texte, mais à une découverte de l'Autre, la contemplation elle-même appelle et attend que cet Autre lui vienne en aide :

Tant que l'intelligence s' imagine appréhender fermement (καταλαμβάνειν) l'intelligible (ὁ νοῦς τὰ νοητά) et la sensation le sensible (τὰ αἰσθητὰ αἰσθησις), tant qu'elles croient évoluer dans les hauteurs (ἄνω περιπολεῖν), la parole divine est loin. Mais lorsque chacune d'elles a reconnu sa faiblesse (ἀσθενεῖαν) et, en quelque sorte, a disparu par derrière l'horizon, aussitôt s'avance, souriante, la droite raison (ὀρθὸς λόγος), qui se tient prête à relayer l'âme de l'athlète, lorsque celle-ci désespère d'elle-même (ἀπογινωσκούσης) et attend (ἀναμενούσης) celui qui, sans être vu, vient à elle du dehors<sup>55</sup>.

Plus ici que la défaite de l'intelligence et de la sensation, mises toutes deux dans le même sac d'une illusion commune (planer dans les hauteurs), la position d'une âme au bord du désespoir nous fait comprendre les implications morales d'une contemplation qui n'atteint son but que de ne pas l'atteindre. L'âme se rend à son créateur : c'est le λόγος divin qui vient au secours de l'athlète, parce qu'il s'est reconnu non seulement dans sa faiblesse, mais comme ayant besoin d'un autre. De ce dehors au seuil duquel l'âme se tient et l'appelle, Dieu la rejoint et lui vient en aide. De là la confiance et la sérénité d'une vie de contemplation, sérénité par delà le désespoir d'une âme qui s'ouvre, dans la veille, à la rencontre, qu'elle ne saurait maîtriser, de l'autre. Une âme qui, s'exerçant aux plus hautes fonctions de l'esprit, découvre l'unique vertu de la foi et se fait suppliante :

Car [Moïse] veut que l'homme de bien non seulement soit juge des différences, distinguant et séparant ce qui produit et ce qui est produit, mais qu'il tue en lui cette illusion même d'avoir la faculté de distinguer, moissonnant même le moissonné, et faisant l'ablation de sa volonté propre à la fois par obéissance et confiance envers Moïse qui dit « Le jugement appartient à Dieu seul ».

(*De somn.* 2.24)

Il ne s'agit pas là d'une condamnation quelconque de l'intelligence et du jugement : il s'agit au contraire de les maîtriser à tel point que l'on devient conscient de tout ce que cette maîtrise comporte de limites. Dès

<sup>54</sup> On pourrait appliquer à Jacob, *mutatis mutandis*, ce que Nikiprowetzky (1963) 28 écrit d'Abraham : « Savoir pour Abraham consistait à savoir qu'Abraham n'est rien, malgré les apparences qui entourent Abraham de revêtements qui lui sont étrangers et que son effort d'ascèse va lui faire dépouiller ».

<sup>55</sup> *De somn.* 1.119.

lors, ce qui est tué n'est pas l'intelligence, mais l'illusion qu'elle charrie nécessairement, celle d'être le centre et le critère du jugement, ce qui n'appartient qu'à Dieu seul. Cette illusion tuée, il reste à s'attacher à ce qui reste (moissonner le moissonné revient à glaner ce qui reste). Dans ce reste, vestige des moissons, survient alors la révélation de la venue du transcendant : l'ablation de la volonté devient la reconnaissance de la relation au Créateur. Il s'agit de se laisser enthousiasmer par lui, seul véritable objet, mais aussi sujet absent du désir. Ce n'est qu'au bout de ce chemin, au bout de la traversée du désert, lorsqu'elle a pu vivre à la fois l'exil, la nostalgie des sens ou de la maîtrise d'une science qu'elle n'a pas, que l'âme découvre et expérimente la sérénité du vide habité. Dès lors le désert de la contemplation se révèle le lieu d'une autre folie que celle des hommes privés de raison et perdus dans les sens<sup>56</sup> : l'âme perdue s'est retrouvée dans la transcendance et, comme enivrée, découvre aussi la simplicité d'une vie en communauté paisible, fondée sur la Loi, dans le calme de l'étude. La lecture allégorique figure ce chemin d'un lecteur qui se découvre, parfois contre son gré, mené par le texte : elle amène à la contemplation tout autant qu'elle l'est, comme l'étude individuelle de l'Écriture amène naturellement à son écoute en communauté le jour du Shabbat.

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<sup>56</sup> Siegert (1998) 205 : « Quand pour finir l'esprit divin bannit l'humain, Philon, dans une alliance ingénieuse de contradictions, parle d'une ivresse sobre [...]. Dans ce contexte apparaissent régulièrement les mots *κορυβαντιῶν* et *ἐνθουσιάζειν* (par ex. *De cher.* 27 ; *De somn.* 2.252). C'est ainsi que Philon se représente la 'contemplation des Idées', ainsi prétend-il l'avoir vécue ».

## *THEORIA AND PRAXIS: ON PLUTARCH'S PLATONISM*

Mauro Bonazzi

In the early Imperial age the philosophical schools were affected by a profound identity crisis to such an extent that redefining the sense of one's allegiances had become a priority.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this crisis are many and not always easy to pinpoint. Undoubtedly, a key factor was the decline of Athens as a philosophical centre of learning: between the first century BC and the second century AD Athens suffered a brain drain of its great personalities, amid the rise of burgeoning new centres such as Rome, Alexandria and Rhodes. In itself, this fact is not important from a historical perspective alone. Decentralization from Athens implied also decadence for those institutions such as the Academy or the Lyceum that in Hellenistic times had been guardians of orthodoxy and presided over its enforcement in the schools. Besides, the surge in new centres brought about a variety of different ways of accounting for one's philosophical allegiances. Almost all schools were in this predicament but Platonism fared particularly badly, as it was seeking to reconcile a host of interpretations of Plato. On the one hand Platonism had to deal with the complexity of a legacy made up of incompatible images of Plato, ranging from the Sceptic Plato set forth by Arce-silaus and Carneades, to the systematizing Plato upheld by Antiochus or, before him, by some of Plato's own pupils like Speusippus and Xenocrates, or by their own students, such as Crantor or Polemo. On the other hand, though, the debate over this delicate issue could neither be sundered from the struggle for control pursued by rivalling schools: in one way or another, all schools (with the partial exception of the Epicurean) had made a bid for Plato's legacy, presenting him either as an heir (the Pythagoreans) or as a forerunner (the Stoics and to some extent the Aristotelians) of their own strand of philosophy. A stance had to be taken on this point, as well. The outcome was ongoing strife between them all and a huge output of (sadly now lost) treaties and essays focusing on mapping out the essence of Platonism—assuming there was one after all.

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<sup>1</sup> Hadot (1987a); Donini (1994); Frede (1999).

Research in recent years has repeatedly stressed the importance of these debates, giving Plutarch his credit due for advocating, along with the anonymous *Theaetetus* commentator, the most challenging ideas. To our knowledge, Plutarch and the commentator are alone in arguing for a unitary interpretation that sought to hold together all the different stages of the centuries-old tradition deriving from Plato's teachings.<sup>2</sup> These are well-known matters, which I do not wish to dwell upon right now. Rather, I want to focus on another aspect of Plutarch's stance whose importance has not always been grasped fully. The originality of Plutarch lies not only in his vindication of the unitary thesis, but also in his passionate defence of his own idea of Platonism outside the boundaries of academic debate between schools, addressing a wider audience. Indeed, one could note that the identity crisis sweeping through so many schools in early Imperial times also comes across as a legitimacy crisis undergone by these same schools, and by philosophy as a whole. For sure, this problem is far from new, as even Plato, in the *Gorgias* and elsewhere, felt he had to justify his decision to spend his life in the pursuit of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> But such an issue certainly gains great relevance in early Imperial times. Indeed, Plutarch stands out from the rest for the sensitivity he displays in this respect: as I shall seek to demonstrate, one of the key points of his interpretation of Platonism is his vindication of the importance and usefulness of philosophy. The analysis of the Plutarchean arguments will also serve the purpose of clarifying his stance on the *bios theoretikos*. On this issue Plutarch seems to stand out from other Platonists of his time, who had insisted on the ideal of *theoria*, drawing inspiration from some famous passages by Plato. With Plutarch things are somewhat different, and reservations are recorded in his writings on the notion of *theoria* as an end in itself. However, this is not to say that, on the opposite front, there is an outright tendency to vindicate active life. Rather, Plutarch is a supporter of the necessary union of *theoria* and *praxis*: therein lies the essence and superiority of Platonism, which reduces the issue of opposing genres of life to a spurious problem—at least from a Platonic perspective.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Opsomer (1998); Bonazzi (2003) 179–240.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for instance Dodds (1959) 31.

I. *Against the bios scholastikos:*  
*Plutarch's Polemic against Stoics and Epicureans*

I.1. When faced with the need to put across a complex argument, the best strategy is typically to establish a polemical target that is contrary to one's own position and against which the latter must be guarded. A fine polemicist (or great lover of controversy), Plutarch has readily and oftentimes deployed this strategy, and not least when it came to mapping out the ideal of philosophy and the model of Platonism to identify with. An eloquent testimony in this respect is certainly the opening part of the *De Stoicorum repugnantiis*. The treatise's underlying theme is notably the many contradictions of the Stoics.<sup>4</sup> The worst inconsistency, which is denounced in the opening pages of the treatise, deals with the gap between theory and action, with particular reference to political commitment (1033A–1034C). In opposition to the Stoics, Plutarch lays out two different scenarios, both giving rise to contradictory results: on the one hand there are those Stoics (being the most influential), who have written extensively on political issues without ever putting their doctrines into practice, confining themselves to a life of learning (σχολαστικός βίος, 1033B–D: Plutarch mentions Zeno and Cleanthes, Chrysippus thrice, then Diogenes and Antipater); on the other hand there are those who have endeavored to carry out these teachings (1033E–F):<sup>5</sup> but they too fall into contradiction, as Stoic doctrines in fact entail a dismissal of and contempt for political activity.

All in all, this controversy stands as a good example of the vehemence and bias in Plutarch's anti-Stoic criticism. To represent the Stoic view as dismissive of political commitment is at best a narrow portrayal thereof, if not downright wrong. Likewise, the same applies to the delicate issue of *bios scholastikos*: Plutarch clearly exploits a number of controversial statements by famous Stoics without worrying too much to grasp the underlying reasons.<sup>6</sup> Rather than being a trustworthy account of Stoic doctrines, these pages—and especially the first part—help shed light on the model of philosophy (and therefore of Platonism) that Plutarch positively has in mind.

<sup>4</sup> See Boys-Stones (1997) for an overall account.

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch does not mention any name. Yet among the advocates of political commitment one could at least include Sphaerus of Borysthènes and Blossius of Cumae, whose merits regarding the Spartan king Cleomenes III and Tiberius Gracchus are credited by Plutarch elsewhere (though not unambiguously; cf. *Vit. Cleomen.* 2.1 and 11.4; *Vit. Tib.* 8.6, 17.5–6, 20.5–7), cf. Babut (2004) 109–110 n. 10 and 114 n. 27.

<sup>6</sup> For an attempt at reconstructing the Stoic position, cf. now Bénatouil (2007).

By way of this controversy Plutarch manages to highlight what he sees as the fundamental hallmarks of philosophy: and if some may be obvious, others are less so. Predictably, the first point Plutarch is adamant about is the serious nature of philosophy, which cannot be reduced to a mere game of verbal ingenuity (παιδιάν καὶ εὐρησιλογίαν), but rather requires utmost earnestness (ἄξιον σπουδῆς τῆς μεγίστης, 1033A–B). If this first point is downright trite, much less predictable is the yardstick used to assess the earnestness of philosophy: the focus is not so much (or not only) on doctrinal consistency, but (especially) on the ability to produce tangible results that are fulfilled in life. Philosophy is a νόμος αὐθαίρετος καὶ ἰδιός, a law freely chosen for one's own, writes Plutarch, where νόμος is clearly not just construed in the technical sense of law, expressing instead the set of values shaped by one's own conduct and life choices. The crux of the matter is that philosophy should yield practical and concrete results; it should set standards of behaviour that at the same time bear witness to its usefulness and superiority.

The consequences of adopting this criterion are even more interesting, as they seemingly imply that Plutarch has drifted away from an overriding feature in the Platonic tradition, namely the importance in its own right of a life devoted to contemplation and learning. To avoid needlessly exacerbating Plutarch's position, it should be noted that no reference is made here to *bios theoretikos* but, rather, to *bios scholastikos*, which is not fully identifiable with the former.<sup>7</sup> Yet, despite this qualification, Plutarch's claims do not lack originality, as the Homeric reminiscence wielded against the Stoics shows: those who spent all their lives amid speeches, books and walks without ever truly committing themselves (the reference is to Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus) lead a life akin to Odysseus's men who, having *tasted* the lotus flowers, no longer strive for home, casting their duties aside (ἀλλ' ἐπὶ ξένης ὥσπερ τινὸς λωτοῦ γευσάμενοι σχολῆς τὸν πάντα βίον [...] διήγαγον ἐν λόγοις καὶ βιβλίοις καὶ περιπάτοις, 1033C).<sup>8</sup> With this image Plutarch not only berates many Stoics for refusing to commit themselves, and thereby denouncing the inconsistency between their *logoi* and *praxeis*. The end goal of the jibe is inferred from the use of the verb γέυω and is confirmed soon after: in reality a life devoted to *scholē* is akin to a life devoted to pleasure, as if to say

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Bénatouïl (2007). Nonetheless, Plutarch in some passages seems to associate *bios scholastikos* to *bios theoretikos*, cf. *Vit. Luc.* 1.6 and especially *Vit. Cic.* 3.3 (ἐπὶ τὸν σχολαστήν καὶ θεωρητικὸν [...] βίον).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Od.* 9.93–97. By the way, this quotation further contributes to satirize Stoicism, which saw a model in Odysseus, cf. Bénatouïl (2009) 16. All Plutarch's translations are from the Loeb Classical Library.



that the Stoics do not live befittingly of their school's teachings, but according to those of Epicurus and Hieronymus (1033C).

The originality of the Plutarchean view stems from the comparison with his sources. As oftentimes before Plutarch also here deploys the dialectic strategy of Carneades, who shoots back at Stoics that same criticism leveled by them against their opponents: the polemical likening of *bios scholastikos* with a life of pleasure is in fact an argument drawn from Chrysippus, as Plutarch himself acknowledges upon quoting a long passage from the Stoic scholar's *Peri bion*. But since the Stoics themselves praise elsewhere the rational life devoted to learning, it follows that they are the true hedonists.<sup>9</sup> To this point there seems to be scant evidence of originality, the dependence on Carneades' arguments being clear. Plutarch's polemic gains interest when it is found that reliance on Academic argumentation does not mean conforming to the Academy's positions. As Thomas Bénatouïl has shown, one of the polemical objectives of Chrysippus' equating *scholē* and *hedonē* was the Platonic-Academic tradition, accused of harboring a life dedicated to pleasure while trumpeting the virtues of the contemplative life. From a Platonic-Academic side these charges had sparked heated responses in defense of *theoria* and *bios scholastikos*, as specifically revealed by Cicero's account on Antiochus<sup>10</sup> as well as by other accounts concerning the Hellenistic Academy of Carneades, Clitomachus, or Philo.<sup>11</sup> Yet we find no trace of all this in the *De Stoic. rep.*: to all intents and purposes Plutarch espouses the critical position of Chrysippus against the *bios scholastikos* simply by wielding it against the Stoics, and thus inherently rejecting the possibility that this ideal may be closely compatible with his philosophy, that is Platonism. In this passage *scholē* is actually construed pejoratively as a spell of idleness and laziness,<sup>12</sup> during which time—unburdened by commitment—one can turn to one's favorite activities and pastimes, thereby shirking one's responsibilities.

I.2. The logic behind the reference to Epicureans, virtually equating Stoicism with Epicureanism—Plutarch's real *bête noire*—is clarified when examined in the light of the final pages of the *Adversus Colotem*. In the *De Stoic. rep.*

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bénatouïl (2007) 16.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bénatouïl (2009) 20–24.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bénatouïl (2007) 13–19.

<sup>12</sup> On the ambiguous meaning of *scholē*, cf. Bénatouïl (2007) 6. It has to be said, however, that Plutarch was not biased against *scholē* (cf. *De genio* 579A and below, n. 53): as has just been noted, he is opposed to *scholē* as a denial of responsibility.

Plutarch had criticized the life of learning (the *bios scholastikos*) envisaged by the Stoics as if it were a life dedicated to the selfish pursuit of one's own pleasure and peace (*hesychia*),<sup>13</sup> thus assimilating Stoicism with Epicureanism. In *Adv. Col.* Plutarch draws the necessary conclusions of this assimilation: what was left unsaid in the polemic against the Stoics becomes outspoken in the one against Epicureans, thereby throwing light on what Plutarch believes to be the nature of Platonist superiority. Once again, the benchmark is *nomos* (and therefore the set of values and rules upon which a city is established), which in Greek tradition has always defined what separates man from beast.<sup>14</sup> Plutarch constructs a three-way hierarchy around this concept, placing in the middle ordinary people who abide by the laws out of an external obligation, while on the two extremes sit Epicureans (and implicitly also the Stoics) on one side and Platonists on the other: Epicureans deny *nomos* any value, and as a result of this men slip back into a bestial world. It follows that the philosophy of the Epicureans (and Stoics too, given their identification) is not only a manifestation of selfishness and worthlessness, but is actually subversive and dangerous to the very existence of men: indeed, who are those individuals responsible for disrupting and destroying everything, other than those who withdraw from public life and from concrete commitments (1125C; 1127D–E)?

As for Platonists the situation is completely reversed: they stand on the far opposite side and are diametrically opposed to Epicureanism.<sup>15</sup> As in the first chapter of *De Stoic. rep.* the Platonists' *nomos* is greater than the city's because it stems from free will rather than from an external obligation. On top of that, here it is deemed capable of salvaging the city even in the absence of laws, as it ensures justice is grounded in its divine and non-conventionalist value: while Epicureans drag men back to the wilderness, Platonists lead them closer to godliness, *assimilating* them to the divine world. This is a crucial point, which we shall come back to. For the time

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *De exilio* 6.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. paradigmatically Hes. *Op.* 274–280.

<sup>15</sup> Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1124D–E: 'For if someone takes away the laws, but leaves us with the teaching of Parmenides, Socrates, Heraclitus and Plato, we shall be very far from devouring one another and living the life of wild beasts; for we shall fear all that is shameful and shall honour justice for its intrinsic worth, holding that in the gods we have good governors and in the daemons protector of our lives, accounting all 'the gold on earth and under it a poor exchange for virtue' (*Leg.* 728a4–5), and doing freely at the bidding of our reason, as Xenocrates says, what we now do perforce at the command of the law'. On Heraclitus, Parmenides and Socrates as part of Platonism see *Adv. Col.* 1121F–1122A with Bonazzi (forthcoming).

being, focusing on the closing pages of *Adv. Col.*, it is important to note that here too, in a manner not unlike that in *De Stoic. rep.*, doctrinal superiority translates into concrete results. Besides, theoretical objection falls short of what is required: as with the anti-Stoic polemic the pivotal proof of the failure of Stoicism was its inability to yield tangible results, and so in the *Adv. Col.* historical events stand to provide the best evidence of the superiority of Platonism:

And though Plato left us in his writings an admirable philosophy of laws and of the state, the philosophy that he implanted in his disciples was more admirable by far (Πλάτων δὲ καλοὺς μὲν ἐν γράμμασι λόγους περὶ νόμων καὶ πολιτείας ἀπέλιπε, πολὺ δὲ κρείττονας ἐνεποίησε τοῖς ἐταίροις), a philosophy that brought freedom to Sicily through Dion, and to Thrace through Python and Heraclides [...], while at Athens such generals as Chabrias and Phocion came up from the Academy. [...] Plato sent one disciple, Aristonymus, to the Arcadians to reform their constitution, another, Phormio, to the Eleans, and a third, Menedemus, to the Pyrrhaeans. Eudoxus drew up laws for the Cnidians, Aristotle for the Stagiritis; both were men from Plato's company. Alexander applied to Xenocrates for rules of royal government; and the emissary sent to Alexander by the Greeks of Asia, who more than any other kindled his ardour and spurred him to take up the war against the barbarians was Delius of Ephesus, a follower of Plato. (1126B–D)

This list is less random than it might seem at first glance, and serves the purpose of defending the Academy against the charge of being a school that fosters tyranny and rebellion—an accusation that went back to the restraining order against the activities of Academy and Lyceum alike, as proposed by Sophocles of Sounion in 307/306 BC and still extant in the pages of Athenaeus.<sup>16</sup> In this passage Plutarch focuses on personalities linked to the first stage in the school's history, probably because the criticism leveled by its opponents focused on that same period. But the situation does not change even in the following centuries. An interesting case for gauging the originality of the Plutarchean position is that of Antiochus, whose vindication of *theoria* I mentioned earlier on: Plutarch notes that one of his most noteworthy merits is to have knowingly steered Cicero towards taking public office (*Vit. Cic.* 4.3–4).<sup>17</sup> Similar considerations apply in the case of the skeptic Academy, as highlighted by the most eloquent testimony, namely, the opening section of the *Life of Philopoemen* that speaks of Ecdemus and

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Athen. *Deipn.* 508f–509a with Bonazzi (2007).

<sup>17</sup> Notably, it is hard to assess whether Plutarch accepted Antiochus as being fully compliant with Platonic tradition, cf. Donini (2003) 249 n. 14. But if he were, then it is thanks to his practical-political contribution rather than to his reflection on *theoria*.

Demophanes, two pupils of Arcesilaus. The words uttered by Plutarch in their praise capture and convey the very same points of the discussion in the *Adv. Col.*: they fought victoriously against tyranny, freeing their homeland and the city of Sicyon; they drew up legislation capable of bringing order and harmony in Cyrene, and above all they pledged to rear politicians like Philopoemen. To end this brief survey, suffice it to recall the two arguably most famous ‘Academics’, Dion in Greece and Brutus in Rome, who ‘both set out from one and the same training-school, as it were, to engage in the greatest struggles’, ‘and bore witness to the doctrine of their teacher of virtue’; ‘neither Romans nor Greeks should quarrel with the Academy’ (*Vit. Dion.* 1.4). These are the products of the Academy and this is the legacy a Platonist can go proud of: no matter how wise or well-argued, a philosophical discourse is worthless unless it is able to bring about fitting actions.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, then, Platonism can claim its superiority over other schools: the preeminence of Platonist philosophy is proven through their deeds, and their deeds depend on their philosophy.

## II. *Beyond the bios praktikos: The Political Theology of Platonism*

II.1. A quick analysis of these passages could lead to the view that Plutarch was a resolute supporter of the *bios praktikos*, understood in terms of active political commitment. This, however, would be a mistaken inference that could be easily offset by many other passages from the *corpus*, where Plutarch seems to favorably view contemplative life as the one most befitting the philosopher. Indeed, to recall the most significant evidence, when speaking in his *Life of Pericles* of the relationship between Pericles and Anaxagoras, it is stated that ‘the life of a speculative philosopher is not the same thing, I think, as that of the statesman. The one exercises his intellect without the aid of instruments and independent of external matters for noble ends; whereas the other must bring his superior excellence into

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Maxim. cum princ.* 776C: ‘The teaching of philosophy is not, if I may use the word of Pindar, “a sculptor to carve statues doomed to stand idly on their pedestals and no more” (*Nem.* 5.1–3); no, it strives to make everything that it touches active and efficient and alive, it inspires men with impulses which urge to actions with preferences for things that are honourable, with wisdom and greatness of mind joined to gentleness and conservatism (ἐνεργὰ βούλεται ποιεῖν ὧν ἂν ᾄψεται καὶ πρακτικά καὶ ἐμψυχα καὶ κινητικὰς ὁρμὰς ἐντίθῃσι καὶ κρίσεις ἀγωγούς ἐπὶ τὰ ὠφέλιμα καὶ προαιρέσεις φιλοκάλους καὶ φρόνημα καὶ μέγεθος μετὰ πραότητος καὶ ἀσφαλείας)’, *Vit. Lyc.* 31.

close contact with the common needs of mankind' (16.3).<sup>19</sup> How may these diverging accounts be reconciled? Should one acknowledge that Plutarch lacks a firm stance on such a key point, but wavers to and fro? Thus concluded Daniel Babut, for instance, acknowledging the persistence of 'divergent tendencies' in Plutarch.<sup>20</sup>

But perhaps the situation is yet another and a more consistent portrayal of Plutarch may be rendered. To do this, however, we must place him in the right context, adopting a Platonic rather than Aristotelian perspective. The *De lib. ed.* 8A–B repeats the Aristotelian three-way partitioning of *bios* into *praktikos*, *theoretikos*, and *apolaustikos* to assess what type of life is best.<sup>21</sup> Like Aristotle and the Peripatos, Plutarch promptly dismisses the *bios apolaustikos* that would liken us to beasts. Yet his solution strays off the path of Peripatetic debate. Plutarch does not claim to favor the contemplative life, nor the active life, and least of all an alternation between the two (the so-called 'mixed life'). Plutarch stresses the need for unity between *theoria* and *praxis*, in other words between *bios theoretikos* and *bios politikos* that turn out to be the same thing. Now, while the differences may seem minimal, this thesis is not perfectly compatible with the Aristotelian perspective, for the Aristotelian doctrine fundamentally presupposes that things and activities are divided along the lines of the theoretical life and the practical-political life with different areas of investigations,<sup>22</sup> whereas Plutarch rather harbors the notion of a strong identification between the two, both in the content and in the activities: there is no true *theoria* without *praxis*, for it would amount to worthless knowledge, nor is there *praxis* without *theoria* as it would only lead to confusion.<sup>23</sup> And this is the Platonic rather than Aristotelian position: indeed, in Plato we find this overriding need to hold together the two perspectives, rejecting the notion that some

<sup>19</sup> Cf. also *De virt. mor.* 440D, 444D with the commentary by Babut (1984) 73–74, and *Non posse suav.* 1096C and 1107C referred to by Bénatouil (2009) 14 n. 52.

<sup>20</sup> Babut (1984) 75.

<sup>21</sup> *De lib. ed.* 8A: τριῶν γὰρ ὄντων βίων ὧν ὁ μὲν ἐστὶ πρακτικὸς ὁ δὲ θεωρητικὸς ὁ δ' ἀπολαυστικός, ὁ μὲν ἔκδοτος καὶ δοῦλος τῶν ἡδονῶν ζωῶδης καὶ μικροπρεπῆς ἐστίν, ὁ δὲ πρακτικὸς ἀμοιρήσας φιλοσοφίας ἄμουςος καὶ πλημμελής, ὁ δὲ θεωρητικὸς τοῦ πρακτικοῦ διαμαρτάνων ἀνωφελής. The Plutarchean fatherhood of this treatise has been disputed, cf. now Sirinelli (1987) 25–26. But ever since Wyttenbach numerous elements have been acknowledged as strongly recalling Plutarch. This passage is surely among them, especially the joint reference to Epaminondas and Dion.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. e.g. *Met.* 1025b18–25; *Eth. Nic.* 1139a6–15.

<sup>23</sup> In fact, there appears to be in the passage an equation of philosophy with *bios theoretikos* and statesmanship with *bios praktikos*: this is because in Plutarch philosophy and statesmanship fail to overlap perfectly; cf. *infra* § III.

areas of investigation are specifically reserved for theoretical sciences while others are reserved to the practical sciences. The underlying assumption is rather the view that *theoria*, being an appropriate evaluation of things, is therefore the only possible premise for true *praxis*.<sup>24</sup> Of the many accounts the most eloquent one is that of the *Gorgias*, the dialogue which expressly focuses on the issue of different kinds of life as a central theme: the goal of the dialogue is to show that the juxtaposition between the two kinds of life set forth by Callicles in the wake of Euripides' *Antiope* is mistaken, because Socrates the philosopher is both things all at once.<sup>25</sup>

And this is the position of Plutarch: the strong contraposition between theoretical activity and practical activity, each marked by its own field of investigation is a problem for those Platonists, like Antiochus or Alcinous, who strive to reconcile Aristotle and Plato.<sup>26</sup> But Plutarch sees things differently: no distinction exists between theoretical and practical knowledge; instead there is only one type of *theoria* uniquely capable of yielding truly good actions. As in Aristotle and Plato, the privileged object of the philosopher's musings is God: it is a typical belief of Plutarch that the highest form of philosophy is indeed the *theoria* of the divine, whereby philosophy is essentially theological.<sup>27</sup> But in a manner unlike Aristotle, yet akin to Plato, the reflection on God is not limited to contemplation or to *theoria* alone. Theology is the true foundation for the human world: *theoria* leads the way and is fulfilled through *praxis*. All the noble and virtuous deeds performed by the aforementioned Academy members ultimately do not rest on their own practical experience, but rather on this theologically-oriented knowledge. In other words, if we were to use a catchphrase, one might claim that Plutarch regards the true philosophy of Platonism as political theology. By basing his arguments on this belief, Plutarch is able to claim the superiority of Platonism over other schools: Platonism is a cut above the rest 1) for capably addressing the issue of God, being the question which everything else hinges on, and 2) because by successfully evaluating the divine it has been able to rouse and yield righteous and virtuous

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<sup>24</sup> Strikingly, this idea finds a parallel in the Stoic views: cf. Bénatouïl (2009). This partly rests on the common Socratic backdrop, even though it yields different outcomes.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Nightingale (1995) 60–92.

<sup>26</sup> An other noteworthy case is that of Plotinus, cf. the remarks by Annas (1999) 69–71 concerning his bid to reconcile theoretical and political virtues. Instead, one might seek out interesting parallels with Plutarch in either Cicero and Alcinous or Philo of Alexandria. For the latter, cf. Calabi (2008b) 155–184, for Cicero, cf. Lévy and Sedley, in this volume, 57–74 and 163–181.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Bonazzi (2008).

deeds, the same ones that have dotted the history of the Academia. It is essential, then, to clarify this fundamental point.

II.2. To fully understand the meaning of 'political theology', we must explain the practical value of 'theology' and the precise meaning of 'political'. Regarding the first point we shall focus on one of the key doctrines of Imperial Platonism, namely the argument whereby, to attain self-fulfillment, the supreme end of men is to strive towards assimilation to God, ὁμοίωσις τῷ θεῷ. Together with other Imperial Platonists, Plutarch too believes that assimilation to God represents the end purpose of both human life and philosophical activity, as well as the true fulfillment of human beings. Patently, the necessary condition to achieve this outcome is a striving for knowledge, as stated in a famous passage of *De Iside*: 'especially we do pray that from those mighty gods we may, in our quest, gain a knowledge of themselves, so far as such thing is attainable by men'.<sup>28</sup>

But knowledge is not just contemplation—indeed, it translates into imitation. When setting forth the essence of God, Plutarch insists on three hallmarks: God's incorruptibility, power, and virtue,<sup>29</sup> hastening to add that of the three virtues only the third is available to man. And given that the highest and noblest virtue is justice, it is by being righteous that men edge closer to the god: intelligence and reason thus serve the purpose of making men righteous (*Vit. Arist.* 6.3–4; cf. also *Vit. M. Cat.* 30.1), hence, helping them to rediscover the divine part within them: 'Consider first that God, as Plato says, offers himself to all as a pattern of every excellence, thus rendering human virtue, which is in some sort an assimilation to himself, accessible to all who can "follow God" [...], for man is fitted to derive from God no greater blessing than to become settled in virtue through copying and aspiring to the beauty and goodness that are his'.<sup>30</sup> And being righteous is not a mere state of mind, but always corresponds to an action. Just as God fulfills perfect virtue by engendering order, harmony and justice in the universe,<sup>31</sup> so

<sup>28</sup> *De Iside* 351C–D: τῆς περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπιστήμης ὅσον ἐφικτόν ἐστιν ἀνθρώποις [...] ὥς οὐδὲν ἀνθρώπῳ λαβεῖν μείζον οὐδὲ χάρισσασθαι θεῷ σεμνότερον ἀληθείας. Cf. Ferrarì (1995) 18–20.

<sup>29</sup> This is then the truth mentioned in *De Iside* in the preceding note: yet it is always a partial truth nonetheless, cf. *De sera* 549E.

<sup>30</sup> *De sera* 550D–F: κατὰ Πλάτωνα πάντων καλῶν ὁ θεὸς ἑαυτὸν ἐν μέσῳ παράδειγμα θέμενος τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ἀρετὴν, ἐξομοίωσιν οὖσαν ἀμωσγέπως πρὸς αὐτόν, ἐνδίδωσιν τοῖς ἔπεσθαι θεῷ δυναμένοις [...] οὐ γὰρ ὁ τι μείζον ἀνθρώπος ἀπολαύειν θεοῦ πέφυκεν ἢ τὸ μιμήσει καὶ διώξει τῶν ἐν ἐκείνῳ καλῶν καὶ ἀγαθῶν εἰς ἀρετὴν καθίστασθαι.

<sup>31</sup> After all, 'without Justice not even Zeus can rule well' (*Ad princ. in.* 781B), cf. e.g. Pérez Jiménez (2005).

we can achieve our *telos* to the extent that, in our own time and in the limits of our possibilities (*kata to dynaton*), we shall successfully recreate order and harmony—in a word, justice—in the human world (*Vit. Phoc.* 2.9). ‘For God visits his wrath upon those who imitate his thunders, lightnings, and sunbeams, but with those who emulate his virtue and make themselves like unto his goodness and mercy he is well pleased and therefore causes them to prosper and gives them a share of his own equity, justice, truth, and gentleness’ (*Ad princ. ind.* 780E–F, cf. also 780E: εἰς ὁμοιότητα θεῶ δι’ ἀρετῆς; 781F–782A).

In Plutarch, *homoiosis* is never limited to the exercise of mere contemplation, but actually comes to a head through practical activity. The worthiness of this position, upholding the priority of reflection upon the divine and the practical value of *homoiosis*, warrants further commentary.<sup>32</sup> In Imperial Platonism *homoiosis* has often been construed as taking flight from this world’s woes, to paraphrase the famous passage from *Theaetetus* 176b. But the Platonic texts that are usually relied on portray a far more complex situation, for even therein assimilation brings about imitation, in that it implies the need for crafting or transforming oneself and others. Assimilation, Plato writes in a decisive passage of the *Republic* (*Resp.* 500b8–e5), is the work of *mimesis*, an imitation that—*kata to dynaton*, inasmuch as possible—reproduces the harmony of the universe in the soul and in the city: if God is the maker of order and justice in the universe (*Tim.* 29a3), then the philosopher is the craftsman of order and justice in the human world (*Resp.* 500d6–8: *demiourgos dikaiosynes*). Also in Plato, then, assimilation is not resolved in contemplation, but is a prerequisite for action. Indeed, Plutarch proves to be well aware of these Platonic reverberations. For sure, even granting that other Platonists (i.e. Antiochus or Alcinous) too have appreciated the weight of the practical consequences of *theoria*, Plutarch undeniably stood out among them as the one who stressed the importance of this aspect as the feature that best defines the nature of Platonism.

II.3. What remains to be clarified is the meaning of ‘political’. In the light of what has been observed thus far, one might expect to find in Plutarch a strict application of the supremacy of the political dimension, tracing in

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<sup>32</sup> Particularly noteworthy on this point are the observations by Neschke Hentschke (1995) 207–216. Instead, Sedley (1999a) tends to view more favourably a settlement with Aristotle (and a reading of *homoiosis* in terms of contemplation).



his writings a vindication of the model, where the *archon* rules wisely and looks after his subjects as would the creator of the world—indeed, the thesis that we find in pseudo-Pythagorean contemporary treatises.<sup>33</sup> But this interpretation is misleading. To clarify this point two reasons may be put forward. Firstly, the theological motivations: being a keen reader of Plato, Plutarch is always aware of the gap between men and gods, and consequently opposes any attempt to deify the *archon*, a tendency distinctive of the pseudo-Pythagorean writings and of most pro-Imperial political treatises; moreover, as a further confirmation of the gap dividing the human beings and the gods, it must not be neglected that one of the basic assumptions underpinning Plutarch's theological thinking is the belief that we cannot fully understand divine truth: what accurately defines the philosopher is not that he holds the ultimate truth about the gods, but that he strives towards this kind of knowledge (which yields ever-increasing degrees of awareness, cf. the abovementioned passage from *De Iside*) and, especially, his caution (*eulabeia*). Without claiming to exhaust a topic as multifaceted as *eulabeia*, I do wish to stress here that given these limitations Plutarch clearly neither regards the philosopher as the wise ruler who is the faithful steward of God's truth, nor does he reduce philosophy to some kind of hierarchy. At most, this option could be likened to an ideal model rather than an actively feasible prospect.

The second and more important set of reasons concerns the way in which politics is understood.<sup>34</sup> If philosophy is political in the sense we have evaluated above, politics, real politics, is likewise philosophical:

But above all things we must remind them that statesmanship consists not only in holding office, being ambassador, vociferating in the assembly, and ranting round the speakers' platform proposing laws and making motions. Most people think all this is part of statesmanship, just as they think of course that those are philosophers who sit in a chair and converse and prepare their lectures over their books; but the continuous practice of statesmanship and philosophy, which is every day alike seen in arts and deeds, they fail to perceive (ἡ δὲ συνεχὴς ἐν ἔργοις καὶ πράξεσιν ὀρωμένη καθ' ἡμέραν ὁμαλῶς πολιτεία καὶ φιλοσοφία λέληθεν αὐτούς). [...] Now being a statesman is like being a philosopher (ὅμοιον δ' ἐστὶ τῷ φιλοσοφεῖν τὸ πολιτεύεσθαι). Socrates at any rate was a philosopher, although he did not set out benches or seat himself in an armchair or observe a fixed hour for conversing or promenading with his pupils, but jested with them, when it so happened, and drank with them, served in the army or lounged in the market-place with some of them,

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Centrone (2000) 567–575; see also Laurand, this volume, 127.

<sup>34</sup> Crucial on this point is the contribution by Trapp (2004) 191–199.

and finally was imprisoned and drank the poison. He was the first to show that life at all times and in all parts, in all experiences and activities, universally admits philosophy (πρώτος ἀποδείξας τὸν βίον ἅπαντι χρόνῳ καὶ μέρει καὶ πάθει καὶ πράγμασι ἀπλῶς ἅπασι φιλοσοφίαν δεχόμενον). So this is what we must understand concerning statesmanship also: that foolish men, even when they are generals [...] do not act as statesmen [...]; but that the man who is really public-spirited and who loves mankind and the state and is careful of the public welfare and truly statesmanlike, that man, although he never put a uniform, is always acting as a statesman by urging those on who have power, guiding those who need guidance, assisting those who are deliberating, etc.

(*An seni* 796C–D)

As Michael Trapp has rightly pointed out, this passage expressly draws a parallel between politics and philosophy.<sup>35</sup> Yet its undertones, conveyed by the more subtle approach typical of Plutarch, seek to emphasize an identity between philosophy and statesmanship, as confirmed by many other passages scattered across a range of different treatises. True statesmanship is not an intermittent string of services and needs, but a way of life, a *bios* (*An seni* 791C; *Praec.* 823C: τὴν πολιτείαν βίον καὶ πρᾶξιν οὐκ ἀσχολίαν), whose goal is not to exercise statecraft, but to achieve goodness and virtue for one-self and for others—more simply, to care for the souls (*Maxim. cum phil.* 776C: [...] φιλόσοφος ψυχῆς ἐπιμελήσεται; *Praec.* 799B: τρέπεσθαι χρὴ πρὸς κατανόησιν τοῦ ἥθους τῶν πολιτικῶν [...] ἡθοποιεῖν καὶ μεταρμόττειν τοῦ δήμου τὴν φύσιν; 800A–B: τὸ τῶν πολιτῶν ἥθος [...] πειρᾶσθαι ρυθμίζειν ἀτρέμα πρὸς τὸ βέλτιον ὑπάγοντα). The aim of Plutarch is not to turn statesmanship into something else, but rather to show that there is a kind of political activity—the only rightful one—that meets the criteria set by philosophy for attaining goodness and a good life. Consequently, a political life makes sense, and is the only one worth living, inasmuch as it coincides with philosophy. What Plutarch sets out to achieve is a ‘philosophization of politics, a collapsing of administration into ethics’,<sup>36</sup> that once again is supported and confirmed in Plato’s dialogues, and especially *Gorgias*, where Socrates proudly claims to be the only true statesman in Athens—not in the technical sense (which Socrates himself admits he has no expertise in), but in its psychological-pedagogical connotation—for being the only one to care about the souls and the real welfare of his fellow citizens (*Gorg.* 521d).<sup>37</sup> Once again, reading

<sup>35</sup> Trapp (2004) 193–194.

<sup>36</sup> Trapp (2004) 198.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. also *Ad princ. in.* 780D with reference to the Academy: ‘Polemo said that love was “the service of the gods for the care and preservation of the young”; one might more truly say that rulers serve god for the care and preservation of men, in order that of the glorious gifts which the gods give to men they may distribute some and safeguard others’.

between the lines of the dialogues and making comparisons at a distance with Plato help shed light on Plutarch's intentions. Still, a number of small but not irrelevant differences with Plato linger on: even these must be borne in mind when attempting to suitably piece together the Plutarchean position.

II.4. As I noted at the beginning, one of the hallmarks of Plutarch's stance is the awareness that philosophy cannot be restricted to the debates between schools, but must instead leave its ivory tower and open itself up to the city. Starting from this need, we can truly appreciate his understanding of Platonism. The primary objective of Plutarch is not just to reconstruct the doctrinal coordinates of the Platonic tradition in a consistent way, but also show that this heritage, bequeathed as Plato's legacy, represents the highest point ever reached by philosophy and by the Greek tradition as a whole. Clearly, this move is not without consequences, because the attempt to show Plato's relevance calls for adjusting to a setting (the age of the Empire) that is wholly different from fifth and fourth century Athens. Consequently, the portrayal of philosophy that is yielded does not always match that of the dialogues.

What has emerged so far is the belief in the 'political' nature of philosophy and the 'philosophical' nature of politics, in a way that substantially coincides with the dialogues. Moving from here, though, Plutarch carves out a role for the philosopher that, rather than being shaped upon the dialogues, seems to address more the society of his time. Whereas Plato appears to conceive only one true form of politics (i.e. philosophy), indeed appointing philosophers alone as rightful rulers, Plutarch instead establishes a distinction and a hierarchy, whereby practical, everyday statesmanship is allowed to stand alongside true political philosophy. It follows that, from being the only rightful ruler, the philosopher turns into the best adviser of the ruler,<sup>38</sup> while the likelihood of the philosopher's direct involvement in statecraft remains a mere theoretical possibility or is removed to a far-off dimension, such as the archaic world of Lycurgus or Numa.<sup>39</sup> Here and now, in the Imperial world, the Platonic theory of philosophers in office means that philosophers must act as advisers.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Without specifying or excluding the Roman emperor: cf. e.g. Roskam (2002) 175–189: 179, who provides a balanced discussion on the relationship between philosopher and ruler from Plutarch's perspective.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Vit. Num.* 20.8–9.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. e.g. *Vit. Cic.* 52.4 and *Vit. Dion.* 1.3: albeit more subtly, both passages deal with the

How should we evaluate this shift?<sup>41</sup> Without a doubt there are differences from the dialogues, which strive to tone down certain instances of Plato's harshness and radicalism, thus defusing the force of his philosophy. No matter how significant they may be, these differences do not constitute disloyalty, however. More accurately, one should speak of a realistic adaptation of these ideas, which are capable of maintaining at least some of the most genuine instances of Platonic thought, albeit in a different context. In principle, upholding his own interpretation, Plutarch could have pointed out that even the *Republic* regards the genuine involvement of philosophers in office as a somewhat remote option, while Plato's own life, and his travels to Syracuse, bore witness to the possibility of real commitment in the guise of the philosopher-adviser. And given that Plato was actually the one who insisted on concrete results, this adaptation is not misplaced. In light of these considerations, it is no coincidence that the more effective passage, which best explains the strategic role of the philosopher—that brings together philosophy's reaching towards the divine, its political value and the ethical value of politics through the mediation of the philosopher-adviser—is contained in the *Life of Dion*, when speaking of Plato:

Dion therefore exhorted him [= Dionysius] to apply himself to study, and to use every entreaty with the first of philosophers [= Plato] to come to Sicily; and when he came, to become his disciple, in order that his character might be regulated by the principles of virtue, and that he might be conformed to that divinest and most beautiful model of all being, in obedience to whose direction the universe issues from disorder into order; in this way he would procure great happiness for himself, and great happiness for his people (ὅπως διακοσμηθῇς τὸ ἦθος εἰς ἀρετῆς λόγον, καὶ πρὸς τὸ θεϊότατον ἀφομοιωθῇς παρὰδειγμα τῶν ὄντων καὶ κάλλιστον, ᾧ τὸ πᾶν ἡγουμένῳ πειθόμενον ἐξ ἀκοσμίας κόσμος ἐστί, πολλὴν μὲν εὐδαιμονίαν ἑαυτῷ μηχανήσεται, πολλὴν δὲ τοῖς πολίταις).

(*Vit. Dion.* 10.1–3)

Plato, the philosopher par excellence, is the guide who helps men become virtuous (especially righteous), i.e. to strive towards deity insofar as possible, engendering in themselves that order and harmony which serve as the

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union of *phronesis* and *dynamis* and not of ruling *philosophoi*, as in the passage from *Vit. Num.* quoted in the previous footnote.

<sup>41</sup> It is important to note that this shift also helps clarify in what sense Plutarch sometimes characterizes philosophical life as 'theoretical' (cf. *supra*, *Vit. Per.* 16 and *De lib. ed.* 8A–B): clearly, once completed the severance (and it is no accident that this severance is implied in both passages), philosophy is entrusted more with *theoria*, and politics is more responsible for *praxis*. Still, this applies in a Platonic (not Aristotelian) perspective, in which *theoria* is no less practical, and *praxis* nonetheless flows from that *theoria*.

foundations of collective and individual happiness. In short, this is the lesson drawn from Platonism, which not only amounts to a set of doctrines but realizes itself as a way of life: a *bios philosophos* capable of combining *theoria* and *praxis*, overcoming the juxtaposition between *bios theoretikos* (or *scholastikos*) and *bios praktikos*; a *bios* that over the centuries has yielded many virtuous deeds, thereby confirming its superiority over other philosophies.

### III. *Plato for the Empire? Philosophers, Advisers, and Daemons*

The relevance, consistency, and value of Plutarch's Platonism also stand out from a different perspective, if we look at its relationship with contemporary Imperial society. A constant trait in modern critical literature is to portray again and again the Plutarchean image of the philosopher-adviser to the ruler as a mere repetition of the dominant theme in the political output of the time.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, one tends to emphasize the lack of originality in Plutarch, claiming on the one hand that his writings taught more about living with (Roman) authority than about changing (or saving, to borrow a Platonic expression) the world.<sup>43</sup> This is partly true, though misleading, unless the differences with the overriding model are also weighed up. The image of the philosopher/statesman/adviser in Plutarch is not functional to the will to carve a role for the intellectual, when set against a backdrop that leaves no margin for concrete action. Plutarch rather seems bent on overturning the hierarchy, by upholding the unique role of the philosopher.<sup>44</sup> I mentioned earlier the case of Anaxagoras, whom Babut had acknowledged as an example of theoretical life, in contrast with the statesman Pericles. In fact, contrary to Babut's claims, this passage reveals no opposition between

<sup>42</sup> Cf. e.g. L. de Blois (1999) 303–304.

<sup>43</sup> A second range of issues arise from his alleged 'Machiavellianism' that is partly real, even though its reach should not be overestimated, as very wisely noted by Trapp (2004) 196–197: the ethical-pedagogical approach advocated by Plutarch, whereby e.g. true charity (*euergesia*) lies not in donating money but in looking after the real welfare of one's subjects (*Praec.* 822D–823B), actually carries a strong critical message of the dominant *mores* and applied customs of the time, the sense of which might be elusive to us, though probably not to his contemporaries.

<sup>44</sup> A partial exception might be the famous passage on Alexander (*De fort. Alex.* 328D–E): therein, however, the great statesman is not matched up with authentic philosophy, but with a restrictive and bookish notion thereof; the same also applies to the jibes against Cato and the *Resp.* in *Vit. Phoc.* 3.2, as well as to the alleged superiority of Lycurgus over philosophers (including Plato) in *Vit. Lyc.* 31.2.

the philosopher and the statesman, but rather collaboration; a collaboration in which the poor and seemingly worthless philosopher (for Pericles with all his wealth was the one who helped others, including Anaxagoras) is then appointed to the highest rank. When Anaxagoras was starving himself to death, Pericles 'was struck with dismay, and ran at once to the poor man, and besought him most fervently to live, bewailing not so much that great teacher's lot as his own, were he now to be bereft of such a counselor in the conduct of the state' (πολιτείας σύμβουλον, *Vit. Per.* 16). Even this short passage hints at the true philosopher's leading role, therefore emphasizing the practical worth and importance of his theoretical musings.<sup>45</sup>

But that is not all. The real difference is metaphysical: the philosopher's superiority hinges on his crucial role as mediator between the divine and the human world. On account of his constant striving towards the divine, the philosopher is a daemonic man who oversees the lives of men, and in this sense his role is even more important than that of the ruler. This view of the philosopher's 'daemonic' nature is less fanciful than one might believe at first, for it is grounded on a specific anthropology that is set forth several times, especially in the myths (the genre of preference for addressing divine matters). Plutarch believes man to be made up of mind (*nous*), soul (*psyche*) and body (*soma*), whereof reason is the most divine part and overriding in the philosopher: this bears out the philosopher's special relationship with the divinity and, consequently, his superiority.<sup>46</sup> But this is not the place to address an issue as controversial as the *daimones* in Plutarchean thinking. I simply wish to point out here how the daemonic nature that Plutarch lays upon the true philosopher (and therefore upon the true statesman) serves the purpose of clarifying one of the issues that has engaged scholars most in recent years. I am speaking of the character and role of Epaminondas in the *De genio Socratis*, one of the most successful writings by Plutarch, yet one of his most unfathomable too. Critics have long found Epaminondas to be the central figure of the book, and the one who best embodies the philosophical ideal set out by Plutarch, namely, full reconciliation between contemplative

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<sup>45</sup> The issue gains greater interest if one considers that beyond the philosopher-ruler relationship there also is that between Greece and Rome, cf. Whitmarsh (2001) 186: 'the ideal ruler is metaphorically ruled by philosophy, a message that implies an intercultural drama of power and authority'.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. especially the myth told by Timarchus in *De genio* 591Dff. with the commentary by Babut (1984) 69–70. The *nous* is linked to the theoretical virtue mentioned in the *De virt. mor.*, without implying that this results in the exaltation of the *bios theoretikos* claimed by Babut.

life and active life (and this is also the underlying theme of the dialogue).<sup>47</sup> So why then does Epaminondas, the Theban Socrates and συνουσιαστής of Plato (*De lib. ed.* 7B), refrain from decisively taking part in the military campaign that heaped glory upon Thebes and Boeotia (the birthplace of Plutarch), and that Plutarch clearly viewed most favorably? The non-commitment and silence of Epaminondas have greatly bewildered scholars.<sup>48</sup> But if my reading is correct, his refusal to join in the political-military conspiracy fails to raise any insurmountable problems. Despite his devotion to learning, Epaminondas is not just a contemplative philosopher, inexorably set apart from his countrymen's political interests: Plutarch repeatedly underlines his caring for his fellow citizens.<sup>49</sup> Crucially, the terms of his commitment differ from those of his Theban friends, by the same token that the philosopher of the *Republic* is unlike the *phylakes*.<sup>50</sup> Epaminondas is a philosopher in the aforementioned sense of a daemonic adviser: it is in this perspective that his character's clear-cut active commitment and thirst for learning are reconciled so well. Epaminondas is not a politician engaged in power struggles, nor is he concerned with backing either party in the process. His mission is to foster divine values such as justice, concord and harmony. This explains his refusal to engage in an all-out military campaign:

Epaminondas has been unsuccessful in his endeavor to persuade us to drop them, as he believes would be for us the best. It is hardly surprising, then, that he refuses our invitation to proceedings that run counter to his nature and his judgment [...] [he] will gladly join with all who endeavor without resorting to civil bloodshed and slaughter to set our city free. But since the majority are against him, and we already engaged in this course, he would have us allow him to await the favorable moment for intervention, remaining innocent and guiltless of bloodshed. Thus, interest as well as justice will be served.<sup>51</sup>

(576F)

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *De genio* 576D, 579E, 585D; *Vit. Pel.* 3.6; *Vit. Agesil.* 27.4; *De lib. ed.* 8B, and among modern scholars Barigazzi (1994) 220–228; Georgiadou (1995) and (1996); Brenk (1996). On Epaminondas' 'Platonism' (in the sense of harmonious union of Socratic, Academic, and Pythagorean themes), cf. Donini (2011).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. now Pelling (2008). After all, this was the opinion of his adversaries, who held him in little esteem, claiming he was ἀπράγμων διὰ φιλοσοφίαν (*Vit. Pelop.* 5.4). Taking a cue from these hurdles, Babut (1984) 70–75 showed support for the ideal of contemplative life in Epaminondas in contrast with that of active life in statesmen.

<sup>49</sup> Clearly, the same also goes for Socrates, cf. Georgiadou (1996) 118–122.

<sup>50</sup> Donini (2011) 408–409 n. 24, rightly draws a parallel with the *Republic*, where the philosopher's true duties of government are set apart from the military functions of warriors.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. also 594B–C: 'He was perfectly well informed, he replied, of the day appointed for the exiles' return; indeed Gorgias and he had organized their friends for the occasion. But he would never put a countryman to death without trial unless driven to it by extreme

The importance of this passage can be gleaned by contrasting it with some other passages, drawn from the *Praecepta* and from the same *De genio*:

Yet certainly it is not fitting in time of disorder to sit without feeling or grief, singing the praises of your own impassiveness and of the inactive and blessed life, and rejoicing in the follies of others (τὴν περὶ αὐτὸν ἀταραξία ὑμνοῦντα καὶ τὸν ἀπράγμονα βίον καὶ μακάριον);<sup>52</sup> on the contrary, at such times you should by all means put on the buskin of Theramenes, conversing with both parties and joining neither; for you will appear to be, not an outsider by not joining in wrongdoing, but a common partisan of all by coming to their aid (τῷ βοηθεῖν κοινὸς εἶναι πάντων). (Praec. 824A–B)

Even more eloquent is the passage in *De genio* that deals with the riddle-like messages of the gods, and recalls a recommendation by Plato—references to Plato should never be underestimated. A first example centers on a mysterious inscription written in unknown characters (hieroglyphs), which is then construed as a message from the gods, who ‘urge the Greeks to live in the enjoyment of leisure and peace by always taking philosophy as their field of contention, laying their arms aside and settling their disputes about right and wrong by an appeal to the Muses and discussion’.<sup>53</sup>

Reference is forthwith made to Plato, when the people of Delos seek his counsel on a ‘strange response from the god’ that pledged to put an end to their woes, on condition that an altar be built at Delos twice the size of the existing one. Plato construed the response as an exhortation to study geometry in earnest and explained the importance of the median point between two extremes (a prefiguration of the *daimones* and the philosopher), going on to say that

they were not, however, to suppose that it was this the god desired, but rather that he was ordering the entire Greek nation to give up war and its miseries and cultivate the Muses, and by calming their passions through the practice of discussion and study of mathematics, so to live with one another that their intercourse should be not injurious, but profitable. (579C–D)

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necessity. Apart from this it was to the interest of the people of Thebes that there should be some men not chargeable with the guilt of what was done: these would enjoy the greater confidence of the people, as their counsels would be less suspected of bias’ (trans. De Lacy-Einarson slightly modified).

<sup>52</sup> Once again it is possible to detect an attack against the Epicureans, cf. *supra*, § I.

<sup>53</sup> *De genio* 579A: παραινέειν τοῖς Ἕλλησι διὰ τῶν γραμμάτων τὸν θεὸν ἀγειν σχολὴν καὶ εἰρήνην διὰ φιλοσοφίας ἀγωνιζομένου ἀεὶ, Μούσαις καὶ λόγῳ διακρινομένους περὶ τῶν δικαίων τὰ ὅπλα καταθέντας. *Schole*, therefore, does not have a negative connotation in itself, but only when it fails to yield results (cf. also *Vit. Pelop.* 4.1 regarding Epaminondas, whose courage and initiative are praised on top of his thirst for learning, cf. 4.7 and 7.4).



Plutarch regards Epaminondas as the full-fledged, archetypal philosopher—as a true daemonic leader of men, above and beyond the juxtaposition between contemplative thinkers and political men. On the strength of his privileged relationship with the divinity, the philosopher must seek to promote the values of the divine world among men, not stooping to their lowly political wrangling, but facilitating their heaven-bound ascent; his duty is to help them rise to the blissful state he has already attained alongside the god. This is his task: to help others become virtuous—which means helping them unite with their divine part within. And this lays the foundation for a world and a social order structured upon and in harmony with divine justice—which means bringing mankind and the universe together. If the debate on *bios philosophos* is also a vindication of philosophy, one cannot help but notice that the one put forward by Plutarch amounts to a grand celebration of philosophy, proudly reasserting its practical and political significance at a historical time in which room for action was shrinking fast.

#### IV. *A Few Closing Remarks*

Before coming to an end, however, there is another aspect of Plutarch's reflections that deserves to be covered in more depth. If my reconstruction is correct, what has emerged so far is Plutarch's skillfulness at perceptively handling a topic of great philosophical interest, such as the debate on the ways of life, and put it to novel use to present an image of Platonism, i.e. of philosophy, that befits the cultural context of his time. Moving from a Platonic perspective, Plutarch essentially rejects the contraposition between active and contemplative life as if they were two separate kinds of life addressing distinct objects and competences: Platonism is the philosophy that is capable of overcoming this false conflict, not by committing itself first to *theoria* and then to *praxis* (the model for mixed life), but by displaying the necessary union that should bind *theoria* and *praxis*. Consequently, Plutarch is able to outline an ideal model of philosophy that can still aspire to fulfill an 'architectonic' role (to adopt an Aristotelian image, cf. *Eth. Nic.* 1.2), even if played out in a wholly different world from the one Plato lived in. For sure, Plutarch was not alone in defending the key role of the philosopher. But it would be a grossly unfair claim to say that his proud reaffirmation of the philosopher's political-pedagogical role and its arrangement in a grand metaphysical framework lack originality.

Rather, one might ask yet another question. Plutarch's design was grand—but was it not naïve as well? Is there a risk that such a 'daemonic' representation of the philosopher might be too naïve with respect to reality and historical fact? After all even Plato had felt the full weight of this problem, as is apparent from his dialogues and from his own life. As has been rightly pointed out, the dialogues are an even grander vindication of philosophy than the one we find in Plutarch. Yet the dialogues constantly evoke the possibility that philosophy might fail, carrying the risk of dwindling to mere hollow verbal exercise. This too belongs to the legacy of Socrates.<sup>54</sup>

So then, what about Plutarch? He was thought not to be aware of these issues. Traditionally, Plutarch projects an edifying image, being praised for his grace and composure, and revered as the moralist capable of fair and impartial assessments across the board. But that is not so: when not busy arguing against other philosophical schools, or vindicating Platonism and philosophy, Plutarch shows deep awareness of the issue surrounding the limits of philosophy, proving once again that he may not be an outstanding philosopher but is certainly a highly responsive reader of Plato. Evidence of this awareness is indeed found in the least predictable of settings, namely, when dealing with those characters deemed by Plutarch to come closest to the model of the daemonic philosopher-adviser: Plato, Dion, and Epaminondas.<sup>55</sup> Take for example the case of Plato and Dion:<sup>56</sup> the relationship between Plato and Dion represents the paradigmatic example of the practical importance of philosophy, and of the need for an alliance between philosophy and politics, as constantly reiterated in his texts, in the above-mentioned passages of *Adv. Col.* and *Life of Nicias*, and in many other passages elsewhere. But the most important work of all, *Life of Dion*, does not contain praise alone. When Dion came to power, he acted like a true philosopher, behaving in a morally irreproachable way: 'as though he was messing with Plato in the Academy' (52.3). But to live one's life in thrall to the Academy—as if it were the only concern—is not always the best policy to follow, given that the Academy heaped no praise on either successful endeavors or acts of daring or victories, but only cherished a life of sobriety, moderation and wisdom (52.4). So when the ill-famed Heraclides (a disease for the city, 47.3) is finally captured, the lesson bestowed by the Academy—

<sup>54</sup> Cf. e.g. *Resp.* 496c–d; *Ep.* VII 328b–c.

<sup>55</sup> Remarkably Dion and Epaminondas are bound together against Epicureans in *Lat. viv.* 1129B, and even presented both as Πλάτωνος συνουσιασταί in *De lib. ed.* 8B (cf. *supra*, n. 21). The same applies to Socrates, another one of Plutarch's models, cf. Pelling (2005).

<sup>56</sup> Crucial here is Pelling (2004) 91–97.

successfully mastering anger, rage, and feelings of contention—makes him take a lenient attitude. Dion 'wished men to see that he was superior to Heraclides not so much in power and wisdom as in goodness and justice' and was loath 'to sully his virtue' (47.5–8) on account of Heraclides. But the outcome was politically doomed, and the situation was settled only when, long after, Dion commanded that Heraclides be killed (53.6). How should we evaluate this? Should we infer that Dion misconstrued Plato's teachings? Or is the opposite not true, namely, that philosophical ideals do not always fit in with the harshness of reality? As suggested by *De Genio* the correct answer may be that the teachings of philosophy are not instrumental to the real political debate, because they strive towards a different and (as Plutarch would say) nobler goal. Still, the task is objectively difficult, and if Plato has been unable to correct some of Dion's moral flaws, then Epaminondas, Plutarch's role model, cannot persuade men steeped in the passions of life to look elsewhere (μή πείθων· ἐπεὶ οὐ πείθει τοὺς πολλούς, 576F). And so the philosopher has little choice but to abide by his median position: halfway between the world of men and that of the gods, a witness to another way of understanding life, withdrawn (in silence: 592F) in a sort of limbo, at peace (583C) thanks to the harmony he has reached, but perhaps also concerned about the disarray in which others live. The daemonic time of philosophy is not always capable of effectively fitting in with the time of history,<sup>57</sup> and a few cracks start to appear in the grand framework that is Platonism. But this is not to say that the framework would necessarily collapse. It is rather a question of acknowledging that, while the philosopher may be daemonic, projected towards the deity, and even strengthened by his privileged contact with it, he still remains a man, and as such cannot expect to achieve everything. Only the gods ensure true salvation: the philosopher has no option but to turn his gaze towards them and endeavor to help others do the same, being the full-fledged model—inasmuch as possible—of the virtuous union between *theoria* and *praxis*. Ultimately, rather than the grandiose glorification of its own merits, it is this striving towards goodness that embodies the most stimulating aspect of Plutarch's Platonism—and even of Plato's philosophy, in which the questions and concerns are no less numerous nor less important than the answers.

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<sup>57</sup> On the issue of time, with particular regard to daemonic time, cf. Brenk (1996) and (2002) 110; cf. also Desideri (1984).



## THE *THEORETIKOS BIOS* IN ALCINOUS\*

David Sedley

The *Didaskalikos* of Alcinous is the most systematic, coherent and comprehensive account of Platonism to survive from the half-millennium between Plato himself and Plotinus. There is no better source for learning the complex ways in which Middle Platonist discussion of the *theoretikos bios* drew on the authority of Plato and Aristotle.

No one doubts that this handbook, whoever its author may be, is a prime specimen of Middle Platonist exegesis. In the days when the name 'Alcinous' was taken to conceal that of Albinus, the handbook was for that very reason assumed to date from the mid second century AD. In the last two decades that identification has been more or less abandoned, and for good reasons.<sup>1</sup> Yet by the time the pendulum swung, this particular text had already done so much to fill out our understanding of second-century Platonism that, even cut adrift from Albinus, it feels like a second-century text. Hence its dating to the second century has remained virtually unchallenged. There is a whiff of circular reasoning about this, compounded by the difficulty that we have very few pre-Plutarchan first-century AD Platonist texts to compare with it. I have no particular axe to grind in the matter, and see nothing implausible about the conventional dating, but I nevertheless prefer to leave the question open, saying no more than that (a) the *Didaskalikos* seems to predate the arrival of Neoplatonism; and (b), in view of its advanced synthesis of material from the texts of Plato and Aristotle, it could not credibly be dated earlier than the late first century BC. Many would be confident in dating it at any rate later than the Augustan

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\* It goes without saying that my task has been made enormously easier by the meticulous commentaries of Whittaker (1990), and Dillon (1993). I shall have occasion now and then to dissent on details, so it is appropriate to record my great appreciation at the outset. I also take the opportunity to thank the many people whose comments during the May 2009 Gargnano conference helped me to develop and improve the paper, and Georgia Mouroutsou for further helpful written comments.

<sup>1</sup> Whittaker's work, culminating in his (1990), was a major influence on this development; see also Dillon (1993) ix–xiii, who withdraws his earlier endorsement of the attribution to Albinus.

philosophical writer Arius Didymus, deemed to be the main source of chapter 12, but even on that question I prefer to retain an open mind.<sup>2</sup>

What is beyond doubt, and will I hope be given substance in the remainder of this chapter, is that the *Didaskalikos* represents a quite different phase of the Platonic tradition from Antiochus of Ascalon. Antiochus was already pursuing broadly the same agenda as Alcinous, recommending a life which would somehow combine both contemplative and practical components, and tracing its origins back to Plato and Aristotle.<sup>3</sup> But his work predates the great era of philosophical commentary, which started only in the late first century BC. Consequently, Antiochus' account of the best forms of life, as recorded in Cicero, *De finibus* 5, shows virtually no direct engagement with the text of either Plato or Aristotle. In complete contrast, Alcinous' version is in effect stitched together out of carefully selected and closely scrutinized key passages of the two authorities.

The distinction between the *theoretikos bios* and the *praktikos bios* is altogether fundamental to Alcinous' version of Platonism, as the handbook's opening attests.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 1 is devoted to the definition of the philosopher, with the focus very much on the innate *capacity* for philosophy and the *process* of fulfilling that capacity. We should note now, since it will bear directly upon chapter 2, that chapter 1's account of the philosopher's natural virtues (here called by the up-to-date term εὐφύια) is directly derived from the first part of *Republic* 6.

Chapter 1's genetic account of philosophy is then completed by chapter 2's comparison of the two lives, which, although it acknowledges the need for a practical life, implicitly presents the contemplative life as the ultimate outcome of, or reward for, philosophical education: it is the life most devoutly to be wished (εὐχταιότατον, 153.10).

By chapter 3, Alcinous will already be beginning on the division of philosophy into its constituent parts, and these are, significantly, the (a) the 'theoretical' or 'contemplative' branch, and (b) the 'practical' branch, accompanied by (c) the 'dialectical' branch. That analysis of philosophy into its parts and sub-parts is one whose doctrinal details will in effect occupy the entire remainder of the work. He will not, even at the end, return to the

<sup>2</sup> See however n. 22.

<sup>3</sup> See Bénatouil (2009) for a fruitful comparison of the two.

<sup>4</sup> See Boys-Stones (2005) 210–211, and cf. the presence of the same theme at the opening of Aspasius' commentary on *Eth. Nic.*

rewards of philosophy. Hence chapter 2's eulogy of the *theoretikos bios*, and its acknowledgement of the need for this to be complemented by a *praktikos bios*, hold as pivotal a place in his treatise as does Aristotle's at the culmination of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It also constitutes Alcinous' recognition that philosophy must be recommended, if at all, as a way of life.

The following questions about Alcinous' views and assumptions are among those that suggest themselves when embarking on his account.

1. What is *theoria*, according to Alcinous, and how is it related to the *theoretikos bios*?
2. Where in the dialogues does Alcinous believe Plato's own canonical account of the *theoretikos bios* is to be found?
3. How does he consider Aristotle's account of the *theoretikos bios* to be related to Plato's?
4. Is a 'life'—*theoretikos*, *praktikos*, or any other—assumed to be a person's entire mode of living (if not for their entire lifespan, at any rate for the present and indefinite future)? Or is it rather just an aspect or component of someone's life, in the way in which we talk about someone's family life, work life, love life, etc.?
5. Are the *theoretikos bios* and the *praktikos bios* related as alternatives, as complementary to each other, or in some other way?

I start with the question what *theoria* is. *Prima facie* the two leading candidates should be: (a) Aristotelian contemplation, namely direct intellection of intelligible realities, by contrast with other cognitive activities; and (b) more broadly, the 'study' or 'theory' of any subject at all, as opposed to its practical application.<sup>5</sup> But right at the outset, when introducing the antithesis of the two lives, Alcinous leaves us in no doubt that he intends the first of these:

There are two kinds of life, the contemplative and the practical. The core of the contemplative life lies in knowledge of the truth, while that of the practical life lies in performing the actions dictated on the basis of reason. The contemplative life is of high value, while the practical life is secondary, and necessary. That this is so may become clear from the following. Contemplation is the activity of the intellect when it is intelligizing the intelligibles, while action is the activity of a rational soul brought about through the body. The soul, when contemplating the divine and the intellections of the divine, is said to be in good condition, and this condition of it is called wisdom. And that, one could say, is nothing other than assimilation to the divine.

(152.30–153.9)

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. n. 9 below.

*Theoria* is 'the activity of the intellect when it is intelligizing the intelligibles': ἐνέργεια τοῦ νοῦ νοοῦντος τὰ νοητά. What then is happening when *nous* is doing this? The answer is presented in some detail in chapter 4, the chapter devoted to the criterion of truth (see 154.9).<sup>6</sup> Intellection (νόησις) is the activity of the intellect when it is contemplating (θεωροῦντος) the primary intelligibles (τὰ πρῶτα νοητά) (155.20–21), which are identified with unenmattered Forms (155.39). This activity of intellection, Alcinous goes on to specify, belongs *par excellence* to the soul pre-natally, that is when it resides outside the body. Upon incarnation, its intellections are converted into something merely dispositional, 'natural conceptions', in virtue of whose possession we are called rational. But as he proceeds it becomes clear that the activity of intelligizing Forms can be regained even during an incarnate life (156.5–13). And although it cannot be accomplished without reasoning (it is 'not without epistemonik reason', 156.6), it is not itself a discursive activity: it is achieved 'by a kind of comprehension (περιλήψει τινί) and not discursively (διεξόδῳ)' (156.6–7).<sup>7</sup>

This technical account sets the standard for *theoria* very high. You are contemplating only when your intellect is directly and non-discursively engaging with the Forms. *Theoria* during an incarnate life will be, not discursive reasoning, but the direct communion with intelligibles that follows upon discursive reasoning. It will become even more evident as we proceed that Alcinous' key text for this topic is the central books of the *Republic*, a dialogue which implies greater confidence than the *Phaedo* does that full access to the Forms is possible for a philosopher even during an incarnate lifetime. It is clear too that, as read by Alcinous in company with many others, the *Republic* makes access to Forms ultimately a non-discursive cognitive event, a kind of mental seeing thanks to the mind's eye being turned towards reality. Indeed, in the opening sentence of the *Didaskalikos* philosophy itself is identified with the 'turning' (περιαγωγή) of the soul towards the intelligibles (152.2–4, a near-quotation of *Resp.* 7.521c5–8). When in chapter 4 this mental seeing is said to occur 'not without epistemonik reason', Alcinous is no doubt accounting for the role of dialectical reasoning in the *Republic*'s upward path:<sup>8</sup> arguing to and from a definition may be

<sup>6</sup> See further, Sedley (1996); Boys-Stones (2005).

<sup>7</sup> περιλήψει τινί is based on *Tim.* 28a1–2, νόησει μετὰ λόγου περιληπτόν, but this last word's meaning is underdetermined (as τινί implicitly concedes), and I take the added καὶ οὐ διεξόδῳ to be intended by Alcinous as exegetical of it.

<sup>8</sup> For dialectic's upward path as 'analysis', see chapter 5, esp. 157.11–15. Strictly, for Alcinous, such discursive thinking is διάνοια, not νόησις (155.17–21).



the methodology without which contemplation of Forms could never be achieved, but it is strictly ancillary to that goal.

It might by now be wondered whether such *theoria*, defined as narrowly as it is in chapter 4, can be the *theoria* which gives the *theoretikos bios* its name. However, the immediate sequel in chapter 4 makes it clear that it is (156.15–23):

There being both *theoria* and *praxis*, right reason judges the things that fall under *theoria* differently from the way it judges practical matters (τὰ πρακτά). In *theoria*, it examines what is true and what is not, whereas in practical matters it examines what is fitting, what is unfitting, and what it is that is being done.

*Theoria*, that is, even when it is understood as the direct and non-discursive intellection of Forms, as it is in chapter 4, constitutes one half of the antithesis between *theoria* and *praxis* which also underlies the distinction between the two lives.<sup>9</sup>

How can this be? How, that is, can that supremely fulfilling contemplative act be enough to characterize an entire life? Even setting aside the need to deal with practical household and civic matters, it should be obvious that much of the philosopher's activity *qua* philosopher is didactic or investigative, not strictly contemplative. The question is one that can equally well be addressed to Aristotle's highly elliptical account of the *theoretikos bios* in *Eth. Nic.* 10.6–8.

Certainly there is for Alcinous, as for Aristotle, some sense in which the *entire* life of the philosopher is characterized by *theoria*: 'It is appropriate for the philosopher in no way to leave off from *theoria*, but always to be nurturing and developing it' (153.21–23). Here we face an interpretative choice.

One option is to recognize the intrusion of a secondary sense of *theoria*, 'theory' or 'study', sufficiently loose to allow all philosophical activities—for example dialectical debate, inductive reasoning, even lecturing—to fall under its scope. To some extent this must be true, because the division between the *theoretikos bios* and the *praktikos bios* foreshadows the ensuing division of philosophy itself into 'theoretical' and 'practical' branches:<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This pairing is anticipated in Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1.10.1100b19–20, αἰεὶ γὰρ ἢ μάλιστα πάντων πράξει καὶ θεωρήσει τὰ κατ' ἀρετὴν, which is interpreted by Arius Didymus (assuming him to be the source of Stob. *Anth.* 2.7.24.7) as a reference to the two lives. The pairing of the two verbs is found in the Stoic account of virtue at Stob. *Anth.* 2.63.6–24 (= SVF 3.280), referring simply to the combined 'theory and practice' of moral conduct (which may be all that Aristotle meant too), but in Seneca *De otio* the verbs *contemplari* and *agere* do correspond to the two lives.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Boys-Stones (2005) 210–211.

According to Plato, the philosopher's interest is liable to lie in three things: (1) in viewing the realities and knowing them; (2) in performing virtuous actions; and (3) in the actual study of reason. (1) Knowledge of the realities is called 'contemplative' (θεωρητική), (2) that concerned with actions to be performed 'practical' (πρακτική), and (3) that concerned with reason 'dialectical' (διαλεκτική). (153.25–30)

Here the 'practical' branch corresponds closely to the concerns of the *praktikos bios*, since it comprises ethics, economics and politics (158.38–42). It seems scarcely open to doubt, therefore, that the 'theoretical' or 'contemplative' part will analogously represent the concerns of the *theoretikos bios*. Yet we learn in due course that this latter branch of philosophy covers not just theology (153.43) but even physics (154.2–4). A discipline with so wide a scope may be classed as broadly 'theoretical', but it cannot possibly confine its activities to the direct contemplation of the intelligibles.<sup>11</sup>

A second option, in seeking to determine the scope of *theoria*, is to place a lot of weight on the precise language used: '[...] in no way to leave off from *theoria*, but always to be nurturing (τρέφειν) and developing (αὔξειν) it'.<sup>12</sup> Strictly speaking, there is no altogether explicit insistence that the philosopher should actually be practising *theoria* the whole time. So far as nurturing and developing it are concerned, all investigative activity, including the study of physics, and even teaching, could be deemed to satisfy the description.

This second option differs in on the one hand insisting on a narrowly defined concept of *theoria*, direct non-discursive contemplation of first principles, but on the other hand allowing that the *theoretikos bios* is characterized by its devotion to *promoting* this narrowly defined activity in oneself and others, and not necessarily by the incessant practice of it. The same kind of qualification may have been intended at the start of chapter 2, when knowledge of the truth was said to be the 'core' or 'focus' (κεφάλαιον) of the

<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in the above-quoted passage, when introducing the philosophical curriculum, Alcinoüs separates the strictly 'contemplative' (θεωρητικός) part of philosophy from dialectic, which is itself however defined as the 'study' (θεωρία) of reason. This last term is certainly not *theoria* in the strictest sense, the non-discursive contemplation of Forms.

<sup>12</sup> *Phaedr.* 246e1–2, the passage from which these words derive, reads: 'By these [beauty, wisdom, goodness and their like] the soul's plumage is most of all nurtured and developed (τρέφεται τε καὶ αὔξεται)'. And 'the soul's plumage' (τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς πτέρωμα) is in chapter 4 identified by Alcinoüs with innate rationality (155.33). This unfortunately does not help us determine the precise force of the two verbs in Alcinoüs' text. Help in this regard was available to Alcinoüs from *Symp.* 212a and *Resp.* 490b, where τρέφειν is plainly a distinct activity from the direct contemplation of intelligibles.

*theoretikos bios*. It is, we might say, what gives the *theoretikos bios* its meaning and value, but is not necessarily its only component. Since this second option maintains the definition of *theoria* given by Alcinous in the very act of explaining what a *theoretikos bios* is, we should stick with it if we can.

What then is Platonic *theoria* in the strict sense? In chapter 2 we read:

The soul, when contemplating (θεωροῦσα) the divine and the intellections of the divine, is said to be in a good condition (εὐπαθεῖν), and this condition (πάθημα) of it is called wisdom (καὶ τοῦτο τὸ πάθημα αὐτῆς φρόνησις ὀνόμασται). And that, one could say, is nothing other than assimilation towards<sup>13</sup> the divine (ὅπερ οὐχ ἕτερον εἶποι ἂν τις εἶναι τῆς πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ὁμοιώσεως).

(153.5–9)

We need first to see the complex synthetic process by which this equivalence between *theoria* and assimilation to the divine is extracted from the texts, and then to ask what it tells us about the character of a *theoretikos bios*. Alcinous' procedure is an excellent illustration of how the texts of Plato and Aristotle were exploited in Middle Platonism.

The chain starts from *Phaedrus* 247d: when the intellect, portrayed as a charioteer following a divine procession, fixes its gaze upon the Forms, 'contemplating (θεωροῦσα) the things that are true, it is nurtured and is in good condition (εὐπαθεῖ)'.

*Theoria*, in the technical sense applicable to the *theoretikos bios*, is an Aristotelian term, and Alcinous does not hide this fact. We have seen him start with an undisguisedly Aristotelian definition of *theoria* as an activity (ἐνέργεια) of the intellect, and this was itself directly preceded by the remark that the *theoretikos bios* is 'of high value' (τίμιος, 152.33), echoing the climactic words of Aristotle's eulogy of that life (αὕτη γὰρ καθ' αὐτὴν τιμία. ὥστ' εἴη ἂν ἡ εὐδαιμονία θεωρία τις, *Eth. Nic.* 10.8.1178b32–33). But Alcinous' characteristic position is that whatever Aristotle formally articulated was already in fact present, even if without the same articulation, in Plato (cf. esp. chapter 6, on the pre-existence of all Aristotelian syllogistic and category theory in Plato). *Theoria* and its cognates may not in Plato yet carry any of the technical sense that they acquire in Aristotle, but nevertheless in the current case it is evidently the occurrence of the word θεωροῦσα in the *Phaedrus* that legitimizes Alcinous' treatment of the quoted clause as Plato's formal pronouncement on *theoria*.

The corresponding disadvantage of his choosing this passage from the *Phaedrus* palinode may seem to be the following. Its description of *theoria*

<sup>13</sup> On this translation, see n. 15 below.

occurs in a myth about the learning experiences of the discarnate soul, experiences no more than preparatory for its future incarnation in human form. How then can this be Plato's canonical text on *theoria* as exercised in a contemplative 'life', which of course is understood as an incarnate life? Alcinous must be aware of this inconcinnity, since he deals with it in the way to which I have already alluded: chapter 4 will make it clear (156.5–8, 11–13) that the discarnate νόησις described in the *Phaedrus*, although initially surviving into our incarnate selves only as a dispositional capacity (155.28–34), can in fact be re-enacted by the intellect during its embodied life. Plato's point will no doubt be, in Alcinous' eyes, that incarnate intellection can never be better than an approximation to what the soul aspires to when altogether unencumbered by a body. The fact that the *Phaedrus* describes *theoria* as an activity of the discarnate soul no doubt supports this interpretation in Alcinous' eyes, and perhaps is even what inspired it, although the *Phaedo* should not be discounted as a further influence here.

Thanks to a progression from Aristotle's more formal articulation of *theoria* to its antecedent in the *Phaedrus*, we have now learnt that the soul when contemplating 'is in good condition', εὐπαθεῖ. But Plato's term εὐπαθεῖ lacks clear connotations. Its central component, -παθ-, might for example suggest an unexpected degree of passivity, worrying to anyone with an eye on the Aristotelian notion of *theoria* as pure activity. Or it might misleadingly suggest the Stoic *eupatheiai*, 'good emotions'. Hence Alcinous' next task is to interpret εὐπαθεῖ. What kind of 'good experience' does Plato mean? An answer is found with the help of *Phaedo* 79d. There the soul, when operating with its own resources and independently of the body—a state of detachment close to that portrayed in the *Phaedrus*—is said to acquire the same stability as belongs to its objects, the Forms, 'and this condition of it is called wisdom' (καὶ τοῦτο αὐτῆς τὸ πάθημα φρόνησις κέκληται). This final remark is transcribed almost verbatim by Alcinous (153.7), to confirm that, when according to Plato the soul εὐπαθεῖ, the reference is to the πάθημα which the *Phaedo* identifies with wisdom. Thus *theoria*=*eupathein*=*phronēsis*.

The final link in the chain is as follows: 'And this, one could say, is nothing other than assimilation towards the divine' (ὅπερ οὐχ ἕτερον εἶποι ἄν τις εἶναι τῆς πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ὁμοιώσεως). The link has been, naturally enough, assumed by scholars<sup>14</sup> to get its warrant from *Theaetetus* 176a–b, where 'becoming as like god as possible' (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν) is equated with 'becoming

<sup>14</sup> Whittaker (1990) 77; Dillon (1993) 55, who properly adds to the *Theaetetus* reference 'but cf. also *R.* 6.500c'.

just and holy, together with wisdom (μετὰ φρονήσεως). If that is so, the textual basis is this time a little more tenuous. The *Theaetetus* does not link ὁμοίωσις θεῷ narrowly to wisdom, but to certain moral virtues ‘with’ wisdom. Moreover, the assimilation in our passage is not ‘to god’ (θεῷ), as in the *Theaetetus*, but ‘towards the divine’, πρὸς τὸ θεῖον.<sup>15</sup> Note too that whereas the previous identifications were reported directly from Plato as ‘what is said’ (λέγεται), the new addition to the chain is merely what ‘one might say’ (εἴποι ἂν τις). Finally, we should be aware that the neuter relative pronoun ὅπερ does not strictly have φρόνησις (feminine) as its antecedent: more probably its antecedent, and hence what is being equated with assimilation to the divine, is the whole preceding description: the soul’s good condition due to its contemplating the divine and the intellections of the divine. These clues, and particularly the reference to ‘the divine’ rather than to ‘god’, suggest to me that the passage to which Alcinous is referring us here is not after all the celebrated *Theaetetus* lemma (to which he will turn only in chapter 28), but *Republic* 6.500c–d. In this latter passage, the philosopher is described as ‘imitating and as far as possible likening himself to’ (μιμνεῖσθαι τε καὶ ὅτι μάλιστα ἀφομοιοῦσθαι) the paradigmatically orderly Forms, so that he, ‘by associating with what is divine and well ordered, becomes well ordered and divine so far as is possible for man’ (θείῳ δὴ καὶ κοσμίῳ ὃ γε φιλόσοφος ὁμιλῶν κόσμιός τε καὶ θεῖος εἰς τὸ δυνατόν ἀνθρώπῳ γίγνεται).

What are the connotations of assimilation to the ‘divine’? If he does have the *Republic* 6 passage in mind, the ‘divine’ to which the philosopher is assimilated according to Alcinous is not primarily god, but the Forms. Why then is the soul said by him to contemplate ‘the divine and the intellections of the divine’ (153.5–6)? In the *Republic* passage the Forms are themselves treated as if they were divinities rather than inanimate objects: they do not wrong each other (500c4–5), and are objects of religious awe (ἀγάμενος, 500c7). This may already have been enough to encourage a degree of conflation between two kinds of divine entities, namely gods and Forms. It could, additionally, be a specific application of the common Platonist thesis,

<sup>15</sup> Even the use here of πρὸς—instead of the more familiar dative correctly used later by Alcinous, at 181.19–20, when echoing *Theaetetus* 176b1, ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν—might make us cautious. However, this variant has I think a quite specific function. In Platonist authors the typical practice is either to retain the qualification expressed by the last three words, ‘so far as possible’, or (e.g. Anon. *In Theaet.* 7.18–19 τῆς πρ[ὸ]ς τὸν θεὸν ὁμοιώ[σεω]ς; Plut. *De sera* 550D, *Vit. Dion.* 10.2) to substitute πρὸς (‘towards’) for the dative, as an alternative (or occasionally additional) way of removing the implication that one might succeed in becoming altogether like god.

endorsed by Alcinous (163.14–15, 164.27–31), that the Forms are themselves god's thoughts.<sup>16</sup> But Alcinous' phrase 'the divine and the intellections of the divine' actually occurs during his paraphrase of the *Phaedrus* myth, which could suggest that he detects there too the same doctrine that the Forms are god's thoughts. One possibility is that he finds the doctrine in the image of Zeus leading a procession of souls around the outer perimeter of the heaven: if Zeus is causally responsible for our souls' apprehension of Forms, that may well be achieved by his thinking those Forms.

But this is speculative at best. The most important point for my purposes is as follows. Alcinous, starting from Aristotle's technical term *theoria*, extracts Plato's own account of it from specific textual data, starting with a passage of the *Phaedrus* which uses a form of the actual term, and citing the *Phaedo* to help gloss the description of it there; but at the end he traces that same account of *theoria*, somewhat adventurously, to a key passage of *Republic* 6. This manoeuvre serves to confer upon the *Republic* an enriched conception of *theoria*, despite the fact that the term and its cognates do not occur there in any appropriate sense. And the need to do that is explained in turn by the fact, to which we must turn shortly, that the *Republic* is Alcinous' favoured text for expounding the relation between the *theoretikos bios* and its antithesis, the *praktikos bios*.

Then what about *Theaetetus* 176a–b, which (thanks above all to Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.2) was to lie at the very heart of Neoplatonist accounts of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ as an exercise of fundamentally theoretical virtues? We have seen that Alcinous does not after all allude to that *locus classicus* when expounding Platonic *theoria*, but diverts us rather to the *Republic*. In chapter 28,<sup>17</sup> when

<sup>16</sup> Thus Dillon (1993) 55.

<sup>17</sup> 181.19–182.14: οἷς πᾶσιν ἀκόλουθον τέλος ἐξέθετο ὁμοίωσιν θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν· ποικιλῶς δὲ τοῦτο χειρίζεται. ποτὲ μὲν γὰρ ὁμοίωσιν θεῷ λέγει τὸ φρόνιμον καὶ δίκαιον καὶ ὅσιον εἶναι, ὡς ἐν Θεαιτήτῳ· διὸ καὶ πειρᾶσθαι χρῆναι ἐνθένδε ἐκείσε φεύγειν ὅτι τάχιστα· φυγὴ δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν· ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὅσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι· ποτὲ δὲ τὸ μόνον δίκαιον εἶναι, ὡς ἐν τῷ τελευταίῳ τῆς Πολιτείας· οὐ γὰρ δὴ ὑπὸ θεῶν ποτὲ ἀμελείται, ὅς ἂν προθυμείσθαι θέλῃ δίκαιος γενέσθαι καὶ ἐπιτηδεύων ἀρετὴν εἰς ὅσον δυνατόν ἀνθρώπῳ ὁμοιοῦσθαι θεῷ. ἐν δὲ τῷ Φαίδωνι ὁμοίωσιν θεῷ λέγει τὸ σώφρονα ἅμα καὶ δίκαιον γενέσθαι, οὕτω πως· οὐκοῦν εὐδαιμονέστατοι, ἔφη, καὶ μακάριοι εἰσι καὶ εἰς βέλτιστον τόπον ἰόντες οἱ τὴν δημοτικὴν τε καὶ πολιτικὴν ἀρετὴν ἐπιτετηδευκότες, ἣν δὴ καλοῦσι σωφροσύνην τε καὶ δικαιοσύνην. ποτὲ μὲν δὴ τὸ τέλος ὁμοιωθῆναι θεῷ λέγει, ποτὲ δ' ἔπεςθαι, ὡς ὅπταν εἶπῃ· ὁ μὲν δὴ θεός, ὥσπερ ὁ παλαιὸς λόγος, ἀρχὴν τε καὶ τελευτὴν καὶ τὰ τούτοις ἐξῆς· ποτὲ δὲ ἀμφοτέρω, ὡς ὅπταν φῇ· τὴν δὲ θεῷ ἐπομένην τε καὶ εἰκασμένην ψυχὴν καὶ τὰ τούτοις ἐξῆς. καὶ γὰρ τοι τῆς ωφελείας ἀρχὴ τὸ ἀγαθόν, τοῦτο δὲ ἐκ θεοῦ ἥρτηται· ἀκόλουθον οὖν τῇ ἀρχῇ τὸ τέλος εἶναι ἂν τὸ ἐξομοιωθῆναι θεῷ, θεῷ δηλονότι τῷ ἐπουρανίῳ, μὴ τῷ μᾶ Δία ὑπερουρανίῳ, ὅς οὐκ ἀρετὴν ἔχει, ἀμείνων δ' ἐστὶ ταύτης· ὅθεν ὀρθῶς ἂν τις φαίη, τὴν μὲν κακοδαιμονίαν τοῦ δαίμονος εἶναι κάκωσιν, τὴν δὲ εὐδαιμονίαν τοῦ δαίμονος εὐεξίαν. ἐφικοίμεθα δ' ἂν τοῦ γενέσθαι ὅμοιοι θεῷ φύσει τε χρῆσάμενοι τῇ προσηκούσῃ,

he does finally turn to the *Theaetetus* passage, the reason for that initial avoidance becomes clear. For him, Platonic ὁμολῶσις θεῶ is above all a moral goal, achieved in practical conduct. The god to whom one assimilates oneself, he stresses, is ‘the celestial god [i.e. the benevolently governing world-soul],<sup>18</sup> not of course the supracelestial god, who does not possess virtue but is better than it’ (181.43–45). Thus the philosopher’s self-distancing from the world, so strongly emphasized in the *Theaetetus* passage, is interpreted by Alcinous not, in anticipation of Neoplatonist exegesis, as the cultivation of theoretical virtues, but as a form of moral engagement (as suggested by its references to justice and piety), albeit one in which a person so far as possible rises above mundane considerations and ‘always stays close to the intelligibles’ (182.3–8, recalling *Phaedr.* 249c8–d1). It seems likely that this ethical reading of the *Theaetetus* passage was the norm for Middle Platonists.<sup>19</sup> It finds a particularly close correspondence at Stobaeus *Anth.* 2.7.3, the well-known passage in which becoming like god ‘κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν’ is explicated as ‘in accordance with virtue’.

With the *Theaetetus* thus sidelined, Alcinous is free to make the *Republic* his key text for the *theoretikos bios*. He takes the philosophers in Plato’s ideal city to serve as the model for actual Platonist philosophers. Their well-known preference for remaining outside the cave, in direct communion with the Forms, is interpreted in Aristotelian terms as a casting of their vote in favour of the *theoretikos bios* over the *praktikos bios*. Here is how the two lives are contrasted:

The contemplative life is of high value (τίμιος), while the practical life is secondary (ἐπόμενος), and necessary (ἀναγκαῖος). [Here follows the account of *theoria* which we have already examined.] (152.33–153.1)

[...] For that reason [i.e. because it could be equated with assimilation to the divine] something of this kind [i.e. contemplative] would be privileged (προηγούμενον),<sup>20</sup> of high value (τίμιον), a supreme object of prayer (εὐχταϊότατον), of the greatest affinity (οἰκειότατον), both unpreventable (ἀκώλυτον) and in our power (ἐφ’ ἡμῖν κείμενον), and the cause for bringing about the goal we set ourselves. (153.9–12)

ἔθεσί τε καὶ ἀγωγῇ καὶ ἀσκήσει τῇ κατὰ νόμον, καὶ τὸ κυριώτατον λόγῳ καὶ διδασκαλίᾳ καὶ θεωρημάτων παραδόσει ὥστε ἐξίστασθαι μὲν τὰ πολλὰ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων πραγμάτων, αἰεὶ δὲ εἶναι πρὸς τοῖς νοητοῖς προτέλεια δὲ καὶ προκαθάρσια τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν δαίμονος, εἰ μέλλει τὰ μείζονα μνῆσθαι μαθήματα, εἴη ἂν τὰ διὰ μουσικῆς καὶ ἀριθμητικῆς τε καὶ ἀστρονομίας καὶ γεωμετρίας, συνεπιμελουμένων ἡμῶν καὶ τοῦ σωμάτων διὰ γυμναστικῆς, ἥτις καὶ πρὸς πόλεμον καὶ πρὸς εἰρήνην εὐθέτα τὰ σώματα παρασκευάσει.

<sup>18</sup> Alcinous follows Plato in calling the world soul a god, 171.29–30.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Bonazzi, this volume, 149.

<sup>20</sup> On this term, see nn. 23 and 33 below.

Action and practical affairs, on the other hand, being performed through the body, can be hindered (καλυθῆναι τε δύναται) and would be enacted whenever states of affairs demand that<sup>21</sup> one instil into people's characters (μελετήσαι εἰς ἀνθρώπων ᾗθη) the things that are seen in virtue of the contemplative life (κατὰ τὸν θεωρητικὸν βίον). For the good person will broach public affairs whenever he is aware that there are people running them badly. He will on this basis consider acting as general, judge and ambassador to be circumstantial duties (περιστατικά), but the business of legislation, drafting the constitution and educating the young to be the best things in the sphere of action and, as it were, privileged within it. It is appropriate for the philosopher in no way to leave off from *theoria*, but always to be nurturing and developing it, yet also, as something secondary, to enter the practical life. (153.12–24)

The systematic contrast between the two lives turns in particular on the antithesis between on the one hand 'that which is in our power', ἐφ' ἡμῶν (153.11), which characterizes contemplative activities, and on the other that which is 'necessary', ἀναγκαῖος (153.1). The former of these occurs in a long list of laudatory epithets applied to the *theoretikos bios* (153.9–12), a list which both of the recent editors have declared to be Stoic in content.<sup>22</sup> I am not convinced by this characterization, and see no reason to think that Alcinous is engaging, either positively or negatively, with Stoicism. None of the terms seems to me distinctively Stoic. Leaving aside εὐκταϊότατον, which has no known source, Stoic or otherwise, none of these terms is foreign to Alcinous' regular vocabulary or at least, more generally, to Middle Platonism. 'Of high value' (τίμιον), and 'of the greatest affinity' (οἰκειότατον) are in addition probable references to Aristotelian descriptions of the *theoretikos bios*,<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> I construe the infinitive μελετήσαι (153.15) as dependent on ἀπαιτούντων (14). The construal of Whittaker (1990) and Dillon (1993), '[...] would be enacted, whenever circumstances demand, by instilling [...]', does not seem possible without supplying <τῷ> before the infinitive.

<sup>22</sup> Whittaker (1990) 77–78; Dillon (1993) 55–56. Bénatouïl (2009) 26–27 cites the same list as evidence of Alcinous' continuing confrontation with Stoicism, which he compares to the anti-Stoic indications visible in Antiochus' account of the best life. In my view, if one were to defend the generally accepted post-Plutarchan dating of Alcinous, his relatively *low* level of concern about Stoicism might well be cited as evidence. But now is not the occasion to comment on other passages of the *Didaskalikos* in which Stoic allusions, positive or negative, have been detected.

<sup>23</sup> For τίμιος, see above p. 169. For οἰκειότατον, cf. *Eth. Nic.* 10.7.1178a5–8, τὸ γὰρ οἰκεῖον ἐκάστω τῇ φύσει κράτιστον καὶ ἡδιστόν ἐστιν ἐκάστω· καὶ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ δὴ ὁ κατὰ τὸν νοῦν βίος, εἴπερ τοῦτο μάλιστα ἀνθρώπος. οὗτος ἄρα καὶ εὐδαιμονέστατος. One might also wonder if Alcinous has in mind *Magna Moralia* 2.15.4, ἔστι γὰρ καὶ τοιοῦτός τις λόγος ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοῦ λεγόμενος. ἐπεὶ γάρ, φησί, πάντα ἔχει ἀγαθὰ ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἐστὶν αὐτάρκης, τί ποιήσει; οὐ γὰρ καθευδήσει. θεάσεται δὴ τι, φησὶν· τοῦτο γὰρ κάλλιστον καὶ οἰκειότατον, although if he has he is taking it somewhat out of context. At all events, there is no need to interpret Alcinous'



and ‘the cause for bringing about the goal we set ourselves’ (τοῦ προκειμένου τέλους ἡμῖν αἴτιον) could likewise refer to the Aristotelian *telos*.<sup>24</sup>

So when we meet among these epithets of the *theoretikos bios* the pair ‘both unpreventable (ἀκώλυτον) and in our power (ἐφ’ ἡμῖν κείμενον)’ we should not be too ready to explain them by looking to a Stoic background. True, ἀκώλυτος is a familiar Stoic term, but its meaning here is determined by the specific context. The accompanying term ἐφ’ ἡμῖν, for all its Stoic associations, is regular terminology in Middle Platonist treatments of fate, including Alcinous’ own in chapter 26.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Middle Platonist theory on fate, as we know it from ps.-Plutarch *De fato*, includes a series of modal definitions, one of which turns on the distinction between what can and what cannot be prevented (κωλυθῆναι).<sup>26</sup> That is the modal contrast present in our passage too, since ἀκώλυτον, being contrasted here with practical action, which ‘can be prevented’ (κωλυθῆναι [...] δύναται), must likewise mean ‘unpreventable’ (not ‘unprevented’).

So much for the contemplative life’s being ‘unpreventable’. A further contrast in the same passage, as we have seen, is that the *theoretikos bios* is ‘in our power’, whereas the *praktikos bios* is ‘necessary’.<sup>27</sup> Now in Alcinous’ chapter 26 we also find the idea, which was to play such a large part in the subsequent history of Platonism (thanks especially to Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.8), that Plato’s own position on ‘that which is in our power’ (ἐφ’ ἡμῖν) is

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οἰκειότατον as particularly Stoic. As for προηγούμενος, it is a favourite semi-technical term of early imperial writers, and anyway may function here simply as ‘primary’ in contrast to ἐπόμενος (153.1), an antithesis used by Alcinous in the adverbial form at 154.16–17.

<sup>24</sup> The addition of προκειμένον to τέλος is common in the period (e.g. Aspas. *In Eth. Nic.* 73.12–13, καθόλου ὁ βουλευόμενος πῶς τεύχεται τοῦ προκειμένου τέλους ζητεῖ; Galen. *De usu partium* 670.14 Kühn, ἐπὶ τὸ προκειμένον ἤδη τέλος ἀφίχθαι λέγοιτ’ ἂν ὁρθῶς ὁ δημιουργός), and is especially common in Alexander. Hence, contrary to Whittaker (1990) 77, its equally frequent occurrence in Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius is unlikely to be a sign that it is Stoic property.

<sup>25</sup> This is amply and illuminatingly documented by Eliasson (2008).

<sup>26</sup> Ps.-Plut. *De fato* 571B, τῶν δὲ δυνατῶν τὰ μὲν οὐκ ἂν κωλυθῇ ποτέ, ὥσπερ τὰ κατ’ οὐρανόν, ἀνατολαὶ καὶ δύσεις καὶ τὰ τούτοις παραπλήσια· τὰ δ’ ὅλα τε κωλυθῆναι ἔστιν, ὥς πολλὰ μὲν τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων πολλὰ δὲ καὶ τῶν μεταρσίων. By implication, some human activities cannot be prevented.

<sup>27</sup> I am here differing from Eliasson (2008) 143–149, who treats τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν as if it were itself being contrasted with what is ‘preventable’. True, the list of epithets for the *praktikos bios* at 153.12–15 does not specifically repeat ἀναγκαῖος from 153.1, but it is in effect referring us back to that term when it says that this life is enacted whenever circumstances demand. Reading it this way has the merit of avoiding the difficulty, to which Eliasson himself properly draws attention, that a contrast between τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν and what is *even in principle* preventable would conflict with the doctrine of τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν in chapter 26. Moreover the latter chapter, by way of confirmation, resumes the contrast made in chapter 2 between τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν and what is ‘necessary’ (179.11, ἐπ’ αὐτῇ μὲν το πρᾶξι ἡ μὴ, καὶ οὐ κατηνάγκασται τοῦτο).

conveyed by the Choice of Lives in the *Republic's* eschatological myth: no matter what may inexorably follow from the choice once it has been made, your actual choice of life is up to you, and has no master. This Platonist doctrine seems to be at work in our passage. When the contemplative life is said to be in our power, is this not, precisely, an application of the Platonic principle that singles out our choice of life as what is *par excellence* in our own power?<sup>28</sup> We will need to consider this possibility as we proceed.

Two pairs of contrasts are at work: the *theoretikos bios* is (i) unpreventable (153.9) and (ii) in our power (153.10); practical action (i) can be prevented (153.13), and (ii) is 'necessary' (153.1), i.e. demanded by external states of affairs (153.13–15). It is explicitly because practical activities are performed through the body that they can be prevented. Point (i), then, must be that bodily infirmity or obstruction, physical circumstances and the like can on occasion prevent the successful performance of a bodily action, whereas there is no bodily obstacle to the successful performance of an act by the intellect, which, as Aristotle in particular would insist, has no bodily component.

Point (ii) is that a practical action can be demanded by circumstances beyond one's own control, whereas the decision to perform a particular contemplative act is always within our own control, ἐφ' ἡμῖν. It is true that Alcinous' syntax at 153.12–14 strictly speaking implies that the power of external circumstances to enforce action is, once again, due to the involvement of the body in practical matters. I am not at all sure that any such implication is intended. If, for example, circumstances require a philosopher to suspend contemplation in order to help plan a military campaign, the fact that this action involves his use of bodily parts such as larynx and hands seems barely relevant to its not being fully in his own power. At all events, the main emphasis this time is not on the body but on the constraints imposed by external circumstances.

Individual contemplative acts, then, are (i) free from prevention by circumstances, and (ii) free for us to perform whenever we wish. From (ii) it seems to follow that, cumulatively, a series of contemplative acts sufficient to constitute a *theoretikos bios* would also be 'in our power'. In which case the *theoretikos bios* itself would be in our power too, as Alcinous indeed asserts that it is (153.11). For a Platonist to call a life 'in our power' would more typically be to say that we are free to choose that life at the outset,

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Did.* ch. 31 on moral virtue being in our power: this is presumably subsumed under the choice of life.

even though once we have chosen it the consequences will follow by inexorable laws of fate: you may freely choose the life of a tyrant, but once you have chosen it there is no subsequent escape from the horrors that must follow. However, the free choice of a contemplative life does not seem to be like that. At no point in such a life can anything compel you to contemplate, or for that matter prevent you from doing so. If, as we may expect, once a *theoretikos bios* has started the contemplative activity continues till death, that will be simply because of contemplation's intrinsic desirability and constant availability, not because of the laws of cause and effect. Ancillary components of the *theoretikos bios* may be enforced or prevented by circumstances, for example giving a lecture or conducting a dialectical debate on a particular day. But we might well suppose that this life's defining activity, the intellect's act of contemplation, is itself entirely free.

In the light of the above, how are we to reconcile the following two apparently conflicting sets of statements?

- A. A *theoretikos bios* is unpreventable (153.10), and it is appropriate to a philosopher never to leave off from *theoria* (153.21–23).
- B. When circumstances dictate, conducting a *praktikos bios* becomes 'necessary' (153.1) for a philosopher, in order to impose upon society the values represented by the Forms that he contemplates (153.13–24).

If the philosopher should never 'leave off from' *theoria*, but should always be 'nurturing and developing' it (153.21–23), we saw earlier that this need not mean constant contemplative activity; but it should at least mean constant philosophical activity, which the *Republic* suggests is incompatible with taking time off to hold political office. Besides, if *theoria* is an activity which cannot be prevented, how can the practical life, which we are told the philosopher sometimes enters, be 'necessary'?

Any answer must begin with an examination of what the *praktikos bios* is in Alcinous' eyes. When he says that such a life is 'secondary' (ἐπόμενος, 153.1–2), we must be careful not to read him as saying what Aristotle is very naturally read as saying in *Nic. Eth.* 10 at the transition between chapters 7 and 8, namely that there are at least two alternative lives of which we can choose only one, and that, as regards *eudaimonia*, the practical life ranks second (1178a7–9, οὗτος ἄρα καὶ εὐδαιμονέστατος. δευτέρως δ' ὁ κατὰ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετὴν). This may be the passage that Alcinous has in mind, but if so he is understanding the ranking differently. There is no *choice* between the two lives. Rather, the practical life is considered by him purely in its capacity as a component of the philosopher's life. That may indeed be why, although he does speak of the philosopher engaging in 'the practical life' (153.23–24),

he more emphatically speaks of ‘action and practical affairs’ (153.12, ἡ [...] πράξις καὶ τὸ πρακτικόν). He is not actually interested in what a practical *life* would be like, but rather in practical *activities*, just in so far as these impinge on the contemplative life.

The clearest demonstration of this is that when the practical life is described as ‘necessary’ (ἀναγκαῖος, 153.1), the description is further explicated by reference to the mixed life of the philosopher rulers in the *Republic*: ‘Action and practical affairs [...] would be enacted whenever states of affairs demand that one instil into people’s characters (μελετῆσαι εἰς ἀνθρώπων ἥθη) the things that are seen in virtue of the contemplative life.’ Both descriptions combine to recall the concession, made frequently in the *Republic*, that the philosopher rulers will be *compelled* to take time out for ruling (499b–c, 500d, 519e, 520a, e, 521b, 539e, 540a, b; cf. 347c).<sup>29</sup> And in particular, Alcinous is referring us to *Republic* 6.500d5–9, a direct continuation of the passage (500c–d) which we have already seen to underlie the divinization that he attributes to the contemplator: ‘So if some necessity (ἀνάγκη) arises for him to instil privately and publicly into people’s characters (μελετῆσαι εἰς ἀνθρώπων ἥθη) the things which he views there [i.e. in the realm of Forms] [...] do you think he will become a bad craftsman of moderation, justice and indeed the whole of demotic virtue?’<sup>30</sup>

By now it is entirely clear that for Alcinous the *theoretikos bios* is the ideal existence enjoyed by the philosophers in the *Republic*. Although he formally contrasts it with the *praktikos bios*, the latter is not viewed as an entire alternative *life*, but as the unavoidable practical component of the philosophers’ lives. For his description of the *praktikos bios* makes inescapable the conclusion that it is a life—or, better, a mode of living—that is available to *nobody but the philosopher*. It arises when circumstances compel one to put into effect ‘the things that are seen in virtue of the contemplative life’ (153.14–15, ἃ κατὰ τὸν θεωρητικὸν βίον ὁρᾶται). And these circumstances turn out to be exactly the kind that according to Plato impose themselves upon philoso-

<sup>29</sup> I therefore doubt the further suggestion of Dillon (1993) 54, that there is a reference here to conditional necessity (‘The general needs a war, the doctor a disease’).

<sup>30</sup> See also Bénatouïl (2009) 28. The allusion to the *Republic* seems to rule out the interpretation suggested by Eliasson (2008) 144, according to which 153.12–15 (translated above as ‘Action and practical affairs ... can be hindered, and would be enacted whenever states of affairs demand that one instil into people’s characters the things that are seen in virtue of the contemplative life’) would refer to ‘a virtuous soul being expressed in virtuous action’. The reference is not to instilling truly virtuous actions in oneself, but to drumming demotic virtue into the citizen body.

pher rulers: the danger of bad government by those not fit to rule (153.16–17; cf. *Resp.* 347c), and the need for high administrative officers such as generals (cf. 525c), judges (cf. 433e) and ambassadors.<sup>31</sup>

If, then, the *praktikos bios* has no status independent of the *theoretikos bios*, we urgently need to clarify the relation between the two. To treat the *praktikos bios* as itself a component of the *theoretikos bios* would be to impose a surprising asymmetry on the meaning of *bios*, with the *theoretikos bios* representing a whole life of which one component would be the *praktikos bios*. Symmetry can be restored by assuming instead that neither the one nor the other is a whole life, but that each is a component or aspect of a whole life, namely that lived by a philosopher. This may indeed be what Alcinous intended to convey at the start of chapter 2. There I translated ‘There are two kinds of life, the contemplative and the practical’, but the opening words, διττοῦ ὄντος τοῦ βίου would more literally be rendered ‘Life being double ...’, a wording that permits the idea that a single life is here being analysed into its components.

We may now continue our examination of the practical aspect of the philosopher’s life. According to Alcinous (153.17–18), the need for political offices to be discharged is ‘circumstantial’ (περιστατικά, 153.17), no doubt in the sense that it is occasioned by specific political or social conditions (war, criminal acts, etc.), rather than being expected as a matter of course. The term περιστατικός, or more commonly κατὰ περίστασιν, is a Stoic technical sub-class of καθήκοντα, referring to exceptional as opposed to regular obligations. But it is important to note, in passing, that even this term’s presence is no sign of special Stoicizing tendencies on Alcinous’ part, since the Stoic theory of καθήκοντα, including this particular subdivision, had been openly incorporated into Platonism to fill a gap in Plato’s legacy.<sup>32</sup> In Platonist eyes, it seems, Stoicism’s chief value lay in its development of an applied ethics, a recognition that was to reach its peak in Simplicius’ commentary on Epicetus’ *Enchiridion*. But even that debt to Stoicism was limited to the lower grades of virtue, and never, I believe, impinged on Platonist understanding of the contemplative virtues and their exercise.

<sup>31</sup> Only the last of these offices seems to have a non-Platonic origin, the role of ambassador having become extremely common for philosophers since Plato’s day.

<sup>32</sup> For this point cf. Whittaker (1990), 78. Anon. *In Theaet.* 4.17–22 remarks that the proem to the *Theaetetus* contains Plato’s sketch of the practical duties ‘which the Stoics call *kathékonta*’. Porphyry in particular developed this way of reading Platonic proems as sketches of *kathékonta*, using περιστατικός as part of his terminology (Procl. *In Tim.* 1.18.29–19.9). See further, Sedley (1999b).

In addition to the requirements occasioned by specific circumstances, according to Alcinous, philosophers have to be prepared to play a major civic role in the drawing up of laws and constitutions, and in education (153.19–20). These activities are not ‘circumstantial’ but προηγούμενα—‘privileged’, ‘primary’ or ‘prioritized’ forms of action, which we may take to indicate that they are a regular part of the philosopher’s life.<sup>33</sup>

This last point brings us finally face to face with the tension that I outlined above: contemplation is in our power and unpreventable, and the philosopher should never leave off from it; yet the practical life is ‘necessary’, and the philosopher is expected to take on some political duties as a matter of course, others when special circumstances demand. The resolution to this comes in two parts.

First, it seems clear that in Alcinous’ eyes the philosopher, by taking time out to perform a political role, is *not* ‘leaving off’ from the contemplative life. The key to how the two ‘lives’ mesh with each other lies rather, I suggest, in the sentence according to which practical actions ‘would be enacted whenever states of affairs demand that one instil into people’s characters the things that *are* seen *in virtue of* the contemplative life (ἀ κατὰ τὸν θεωρητικὸν βίον ὁρᾶται)’ (153.13–15). If practical activity meant taking a break from the contemplative life, one might expect a more suitably tensed description: things that *have been* seen *during* the contemplative life. The language chosen permits, perhaps even encourages, a reading according to which the contemplative life and the practical life are two concurrent aspects of the philosopher’s one actual life. When he ‘enters the practical life’, he is at that very time continuing to live his contemplative life too, in so far as he is drawing on the direct grasp of the transcendent Forms that philosophers alone exercise.

So much for how the *theoretikos bios* can remain uninterrupted. The other problem is how such a life can be ‘in our power’ when certain practical activities are ‘necessary’ (153.1). It could be that the solution to the previous problem, if it is as I have suggested, is deemed already to solve this one too: if circumstances compel you to take political office, but taking political

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the outline (usually attributed to Arius Didymus) of Peripatetic ethics at Stob. *Anth.* 2.144.18–23: βίων δὲ τριττὰς ἰδέας εἶναι, πρακτικόν, θεωρητικόν, σύνθετον ἐξ ἀμφοῖν. τὸν μὲν γὰρ ἀπολαυστικὸν ἥττονα ἢ κατ’ ἀνθρώπον εἶναι, προκρίνεσθαι δὲ τῶν ἄλλων τὸν θεωρητικόν. πολιτεύεσθαι τε τὸν σπουδαῖον προηγούμενως, μὴ κατὰ περίστασιν· τὸν γὰρ πρακτικὸν βίον τὸν αὐτὸν εἶναι τῷ πολιτικῷ. It seems that the term προηγούμενως has taken over from the Stoic ἀνευ περιστάσεως for ‘non-circumstantial’ obligations. It of course has nothing to do with the Stoic ethical term προηγμένον.

office is not an interruption of your contemplative activity, then your contemplative life remains entirely in your power. However, we may suspect that in addition the notion of necessity has been reinterpreted. Although the ‘necessity’ that stands in contrast with ‘what is in our power’ might be expected to amount to compulsion, the necessitation recalled from the *Republic* at 153.1 becomes, at 153.14, a case of circumstances merely ‘demanding’ (ἀπαιτούντων) that the philosopher act, further glossed by the assertion that ‘it is appropriate’ (πρέπει, 153.21) for him to do so. This progressive weakening suggests the interpretation, which has plenty of modern advocates too, that the *Republic* in expecting philosophers to take part in government is not really proposing any compulsion beyond the intrinsic force of moral obligation.

If the most desirable life is in fact a mixture of *theoria* and *praxis*, why is it the *theoretikos bios*, and not what the Peripatetic tradition called the ‘mixed’ life,<sup>34</sup> that is extolled? In so meticulously worded a treatise, it is unlikely that the absence of this key term is merely accidental. In Alcinous’ eyes the ‘core’ (κεφάλαιον, 152.31) of the philosopher’s life lies in the exercise of the intellect. This we may take to mean that, although both contemplation and action are components of it, it is the contemplative component alone that gives the philosophical life its distinctive character and surpassing value.

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. text in previous note. A similar anomaly arises in Antiochus, who is reported by Augustine to have favoured the mixed life (*De civ. Dei* 19.3), but who as presented in Cic. *De fin.* 5 seems to be recommending the contemplative life above all others (see Tsouni 2012).





## PLOTINUS AND PORPHYRY ON THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

Alessandro Linguiti

The Neoplatonists were fervent proponents of the contemplative life. Much evidence exists regarding their considerable intellectual output, as well as their commitment to the philosophical speculation and the teaching of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> No doubt, at one point Neoplatonists started attaching great importance to theurgy and magic, yet this does not seem to have weakened their commitment to school teaching and theoretical thinking. Even Proclus, who—according to his biographer Marinus—spent most of his day praying or evoking daemons and gods,<sup>2</sup> always gave proof of astonishing intellectual industriousness. Marinus writes:

For without stint did he give himself up to his love for work (φιλοπονία), daily teaching five periods, and sometimes more, and writing much, about 700 lines. Nor did this labor hinder him from visiting other philosophers, from giving purely oral evening lectures etc.<sup>3</sup>

(Marin. *Vit. Procli* 22.29–34= p. 27 Saffrey-Segonds; tr. K.S. Guthrie)

Further evidence might easily be adduced, but what really matters here is to stress not the actual lifestyle of the Neoplatonists, but rather their philosophical understanding of the contemplative life. Extant sources—it must be said—appear somewhat reticent on this matter. Plotinus, while discussing θεωρία at length in his writings, provides a very peculiar treatment of the contemplative life (as we shall soon see), and many of his followers only fleetingly touch upon the issue, out of hesitance, perhaps, as to whether they are to accept or reject Plotinus' teaching in this sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> For Plotinus, see p. 188 below; for Proclus, see Marin. *Vit. Procli* 22–25 (pp. 25–29 Saffrey-Segonds); for Damascius, see Simpl. *In Phys.* 624.38; 795.15–17. On the difference between the broad definition of 'contemplative life' and the strict, see the introduction to the present volume, 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Marin. *Vit. Procli* 22.34–37 (p. 27 Saffrey-Segonds); 28–33 (pp. 33–39 Saffrey-Segonds).

<sup>3</sup> See also *Vit. Procli* 3.19–27 (p. 4 Saffrey-Segonds).

## I. Plotinus

In examining the contemplative life, Plotinus almost invariably displays an inclination towards metaphysics. This is most clear in *Enneads* 3.8, the thirtieth treatise according to the chronological order of the work, and the first in the so-called ‘anti-Gnostic tetralogy’.<sup>4</sup> In 3.8 [30], contemplation amounts to that by means of which all levels of reality after the One are produced. The coming into being of the Being-Intellect and, after it, of the hypostatic Soul, the universal Soul and the physical world is in each case the consequence of an act of vision or contemplation (θεωρεῖν).<sup>5</sup> The Being-Intellect stems from the One because an indistinct power, eternally<sup>6</sup> flowing from the highest source, reverts to the One in order to contemplate it: only at this point does the Being-Intellect become what it really is, which is to say a stable and harmonious community of Forms that think themselves.<sup>7</sup> Soul derives from the Being-Intellect in an analogous way: out of superabundance, a noetic energy, similar to light, flows from a higher principle and then reverts to its origin in order to contemplate it; as a result of this vision, a new level of reality arises—the Soul as the first image of the intelligible order.<sup>8</sup> All subsequent levels of reality come into being by a similar process: even Nature, the lower limb of the World Soul, engenders bodies by means of its unconscious thinking, a sort of dim and dreamlike contemplation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Porphyry, as is well known, ultimately chose to arrange Plotinus’ writings according to their subject matter, while also providing their chronology (cf. Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 4–6, 24–26). As far as the ‘anti-Gnostic tetralogy’ is concerned, R. Harder regarded enneadic treatises 3.8 [30], 5.8 [31], 5.5 [32] and 2.9 [33] as a single *Großschrift* polemically addressed against the Gnostics; see Harder [1936]. There is a wide—although not universal—agreement on Harder’s suggestion: see now esp. Guerra (2000). In the opinion of R. Dufour, by contrast, only treatises 5.8 [31] and 5.5 [32] would be part of the same exposition (see Dufour [2006]).

<sup>5</sup> See esp. Plot. *Enn.* 3.8 [30] 4 and 7.

<sup>6</sup> That is, in the extra-temporal eternity of the intelligible world. Cf. *On Eternity and Time* (Plot. *Enn.* 3.7 [45]).

<sup>7</sup> See esp. Plot. *Enn.* 5.4 [7] 2; 5.1 [10] 5–7; 5.2 [11] 1; 5.5 [32] 5 (the terms most often used by Plotinus are ὁρᾶν, ἰδεῖν; βλέπειν; ὁψις; θεᾶ).

<sup>8</sup> See Plot. *Enn.* 5.1 [10] 3; 5.2 [11] 1; 2.4 [12] 3.1–5; 5.3 [49] 9.

<sup>9</sup> See Plot. *Enn.* 3.8 [30] 4.1–14: ‘And if anyone were to ask nature why it makes, if it cared to hear and answer the questioner it would say: “You ought not to ask, but to understand in silence, you, too, just as I am silent and not in the habit of talking. Understand what, then? That what comes into being is what I see in my silence, an object of contemplation which comes to be naturally, and that I, originating from this sort of contemplation have a contemplative nature. And my act of contemplation makes what it contemplates, as the geometers draw their figures while they contemplate. But I do not draw, but as I contemplate, the lines which bounds body come to be as if they fell from my contemplation. What happens

Once again, it is important to stress that the energy which in each case flows down from a higher principle to produce a lower level of reality is always described by Plotinus as an intellectual activity and noetic vision, which is to say an act of contemplation. On these assumptions, everything that exists within reality is either thought or an outcome of thought.

As far as human contemplation is concerned, Plotinus pays much attention to the perfect theoretical life eternally<sup>10</sup> enjoyed by the noblest part of the human soul, the so-called 'undescended soul'. According to Plotinus, the human soul does not entirely descend into the world of Becoming,<sup>11</sup> as part of it permanently dwells in the Being-Intellect, benefitting from an all-embracing vision of the Forms. Even though as embodied human beings we are very seldom aware of our 'superior' life, the higher contemplation our soul enjoys never comes to an end: rather, this continuously bestows the most perfect happiness on our transcendent Self.<sup>12</sup> No doubt, Plotinus is chiefly interested in this peculiar aspect of the contemplative life, which has been properly described as the 'trionfo dell'ideale della θεωρία quale è delineato nel decimo libro dell'*Etica Nicomachea*'.<sup>13</sup> But how did Plotinus conceive of the relation—if indeed he ever posited one—between this superior contemplation and βίος θεωρητικός as it is commonly understood? In other words, how was it possible for him to harmonize the noetic life of the undescended soul with the intellectual activity of the dialectician described in *Enneads* 1.3 [20] or the practice of the rational virtues (σοφία and φρόνησις) on the part of the σπουδαῖος discussed in *Enneads* 1.2 [19]?

Plotinus himself, as might be expected, was often absorbed in philosophical speculations.<sup>14</sup> How did he envisage, then, the relation between these experiences and the eternal contemplation enjoyed by his undescended soul? It is not easy to answer this question, given the scantiness of explicit statements on the subject in the *Enneads*. Nevertheless, the existence of some positive link may be posited, some sort of connection between the two kinds of contemplation (the one enjoyed by the undescended soul and

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to me is what happens to my mother and the beings that generated me, for they, too, derive from contemplation, and it is no action of theirs which brings about my birth; they are greater rational principles, and as they contemplate themselves I come to be" (tr. Armstrong).

<sup>10</sup> See above, n. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Plot. *Enn.* 4.7 [2] 13.1–13; 4.2 [4] 12–13; 4.8 [6] 4.30–31, 8.1–6, 8.17–18; 4.3 [27] 12.4–5; 2.9 [33] 2.4–10. A valuable introduction to the Plotinian doctrine of the 'undescended soul' can be found in Szlezák (1979) 167–205 and Chiaradonna (2009a) 81–115.

<sup>12</sup> For the meaning of 'we' in the *Enneads*, see now Chiaradonna (2008).

<sup>13</sup> Donini (1982) 277.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 8 and 13, quoted below, p. 188.

that of the embodied philosopher). A well-known passage in the *Enneads* would actually appear to rule out this possibility: in 1.4 [46] awareness of the 'higher' contemplation—an awareness evidently attained by leading a philosophical life and exercising philosophical scrutiny—is said to impinge on the purity of the theoretical life experienced by our undescended soul in the Being-Intellect.<sup>15</sup> This case, however, need not be overstressed, for elsewhere in the *Enneads* the concurrency of the rational activities of the embodied self on the one hand and those of the transcendent self on the other has no negative consequences.<sup>16</sup>

According to Plotinus, while all human beings share the perfect noetic life of the Being-Intellect by virtue of their own transcendent Self, only a few—presumably, gifted Platonic philosophers—do so consciously. In Plotinus' view, what distinguishes the sage from ordinary men is precisely his—however rare—conscious experiencing of the 'higher' contemplation and the perfect happiness this engenders.<sup>17</sup> This experience requires a long work of preparation, consisting in the extended practice of moral and intellectual virtues as commonly understood; only afterwards, will the individual mind have the chance to merge with the hypostatic Intellect.<sup>18</sup> According to

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<sup>15</sup> 'But if wisdom essentially consists in a substance, or rather *in the* substance, and this substance does not cease to exist in someone who is asleep or what is called unconscious; if the real activity of the substance goes on in him, and this activity is unsleeping; then the good man (ὁ σπουδαῖος), in that he is a good man, will be active even then. It will be not the whole of him that is unaware of this activity, but only a part of him [...]. Perhaps we do not notice it because it is not concerned with any object of sense; for our minds, by means of sense-perception—which is a kind of intermediary when dealing with sensible things—do appear to work on the level of sense and think about sense objects. But why should not intellect itself be active [without perception], and also its attendant soul, which comes before sense-perception and any sort of awareness? [...] One can find a great many valuable activities, theoretical and practical, which we carry on both in our contemplative and active life even when we are fully conscious, which do not make us aware of them. The reader is not necessarily aware that he is reading, least of all when he is really concentrating; nor the man who is being brave that he is being brave and that his action conforms to the virtue of courage; and there are thousands of similar cases. Conscious awareness, in fact, is likely to enfeeble the very activities of which there is consciousness; only when they are alone are they pure and more genuinely active and living; and when good men are in this state their life is increased, when it is not spilt out into perception, but gathered together in one in itself' (Plot. *Enn.* 1.4 [46] 9.19–10.33; tr. Armstrong). This passage is examined in the valuable study by Schibli (1989).

<sup>16</sup> See Plot. *Enn.* 4.8 [6] 1.1–7; 5.1 [10] 12.13–15; 4.3 [27] 30.14–15; Bussanich (1994) 5312.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Rist (1967) 148: 'everyone is in fact happy all the time, while the difference between the philosopher and the rest of mankind is that he is aware of the fact while they are not'; and, more recently, Remes (2007) 232.

<sup>18</sup> Particularly thanks to Hadot (1980) especially 245; Id. (1987b) especially 25–26 and Eborowicz (1957) and (1958) especially 61–63, before him, Plotinian scholars are now paying

Plotinus, the theoretical activity of the undescended soul, like the blissful happiness deriving from it, is totally immune from any accidents that may affect the embodied soul. In this way, Plotinus both provides a new formulation of characteristically Stoic approaches<sup>19</sup> and considerably limits—at least in the opinion of accredited scholars—his philosophical discussion of ethics.<sup>20</sup>

We are now in a better position to examine the problematic relationship between the theoretical activity of the embodied philosopher, or 'lower' contemplation, as we can term it, and the theoretical activity of the undescended soul, or 'higher' contemplation. The former in no way affects the latter: for 'lower' contemplation represents a first and necessary—albeit not sufficient—stage for those wishing to gain consciousness of 'higher' contemplation. But is the opposite also the case? Does 'higher' contemplation in any way affect the 'lower'? To begin with, 'higher' contemplation may be envisaged as a normative pattern for the empirical self, not in the sense that human beings have to strive to reach a condition initially foreign to them, but rather in the sense that they should always do their best to gain consciousness of the condition they permanently find themselves in.<sup>21</sup> We may wonder, then, whether and in what way the general attitude of the sage changes, once he has experienced the extraordinary βίος θεωρητικός of his transcendent Self (his undescended soul). There is no ground to surmise that the way of life of the sage is completely transformed by this event. On the contrary, we may expect the sage to keep paying attention to the practical demands of everyday life and exercising his usual intellectual activities, albeit—presumably—not in the same manner as before. To assess the peculiar way in which the sage might perform a variety of acts, both practical and intellectual, it is first worth considering some interesting passages from the *Vita Plotini*, where Porphyry stresses Plotinus' concern for his public and human duties, as well as his exceptional power of concentration. When absorbed in thought, Plotinus seemed to be living in two different worlds simultaneously:

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due attention to the issue of the soul's mystical union with the hypostatic Intellect rather than merely focussing on its mystical re-union with the One. On this subject, see also Bussanich (1994).

<sup>19</sup> On this, see Linguisti (2001).

<sup>20</sup> For a sceptical view, see now Chiaradonna (2009b). Instead, for a positive evaluation of the role of ethics and pedagogy in Plotinus' thought, see Schniewind (2003) and (2005). The various Neoplatonic approaches to politics are well assessed by O'Meara (2003).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Remes (2007) 126 and 191.

Many men and women of the highest rank, on the approach of death, brought him their children, both boys and girls, and entrusted them to him along with all their property, considering that he would be a holy and god-like guardian. So his house was full of young lads and maidens, including Potamon, to whose education he gave serious thought, and would even listen to him revising the same lesson again and again. He patiently attended to the accounts of their property when their trustees submitted them, and took care that they should be accurate; he used to say that as long as they did not take to philosophy their properties and incomes must be kept safe and untouched for them. Yet, though he shielded so many from worries and cares of ordinary life, he never, while awake, relaxed his intent concentration upon the intellect. He was gentle, too, and at the disposal of all who had any sort of acquaintance with him. Though he spent twenty-six whole years in Rome and acted as arbitrator in very many people's disputes, he never made an enemy of any of the officials.

(Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 9.5–22; tr. Armstrong)

Even if he was talking to someone, engaged in continuous conversation, he kept to his train of thought. He could take his necessary part in the conversation to the full, and at the same time keep his mind fixed without a break on what he was considering. When the person he had been talking to was gone he did not go over what he had written, because his sight, as I have said, did not suffice for revision. He went straight on with what came next, keeping the connection, just as if there had been no interval of conversation between. In this way he was present at once to himself and to others, and he never relaxed his self-turned attention except in sleep: even sleep he reduced by taking very little food, often not even a piece of bread, and by his continuous turning in contemplation to his intellect.

(Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 8.11–23; tr. Armstrong)

In the meetings of the school he showed an adequate command of language and the greatest power of discovering and considering what was relevant to the subject in hand [...]. When he was speaking his intellect visibly lit up his face: there was always a charm about his appearance, but at these times he was still more attractive to look at: he sweated gently, and kindness shone out from him, and in answering questions he made clear both his benevolence to the questioner and his intellectual vigor. Once I, Porphyry, went on asking him for three days about the soul's connection with the body, and he kept on explaining to me.

(Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 13.1–12; tr. Armstrong)

Turning now to the *Enneads*, a passage from the treatise *On virtues* (1.2 [19]) can be seen to shed further light on the problem at issue:

Perhaps the possessor of the superior virtues will know the inferior ones, and how much he can get from them, and will act according to some of them as circumstances require. But when he reaches higher principles and different measures he will act according to these.

(Plot. *Enn.* 1.2 [19] 7.19–22; tr. Armstrong, slightly modified)

Plotinus is here dealing with the final stage in the process of assimilation to God, and in such a context his emphasis is naturally on the 'superior'

virtues—those related to the use of reason and the intellect—to the detriment of ‘inferior’ virtues. The latter, as Plotinus explains in the first section of *Enneads* 1.2 [19], consist of the four traditional Platonic virtues, which are classed among the ‘civic’ or ‘political’ virtues (πολιτικά ἀρεταί):

practical wisdom (φρόνησις) which has to do with discursive reason, courage which has to do with the emotions, balanced control (σωφροσύνη) which consists in a sort of agreement and harmony of passion and reason, justice which makes each of these parts agree in ‘minding their own business where ruling and being ruled are concerned’.

(Plot. *Enn.* 1.2 [19] 1.17–21; tr. Armstrong)

In the passage from chapter 7 quoted above, Plotinus tentatively concedes the use of the civic virtues on the part of the sage who has already attained a superior way of life. I am inclined to agree with the interpretation of this passage provided by Alexandrine Schniewind,<sup>22</sup> who stresses the importance of the double ‘journey’ made by the σπουδαῖος (that is, the philosopher): upwards, towards the divine principles (Being-Intellect and ultimately the One), and downwards, back into the world where ordinary people live. Once his soul has reached the higher echelons of reality, the σπουδαῖος has no more need of civic virtues, although these proved indispensable for him in the first phase of his ascent: the philosopher who has completed his ascent lives a life that is no longer human—a life almost divine, consisting of the purest contemplation. Still, the sage must come back to the ordinary world and interact with other human beings, thus fulfilling a crucial pedagogical role. All this tallies very well with the abovementioned biographical reports on Plotinus and explains why the sage does not cease practicing ‘inferior’ virtues once he has attained a superior mode of existence. On the contrary, the moral actions of the sage are particularly valuable, although this does not imply that morality is the ultimate *end* of contemplation: throughout *Enneads* 1.2 [19] moral and cognitive virtues are treated separately, if not set in contrast, and assimilation to God is exclusively equated with theoretical contemplation. For Plotinus, the fact that the latter enhances the moral character of the sage is probably a welcome but nonetheless *accidental* consequence of the process of ascension.

More remains to be said about the moral action of the sage who is aware of his ‘higher’ contemplation and has thus become godlike. What is most helpful here is the notion of ‘automatic’ or ‘spontaneous’ action adumbrated

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Schniewind (2003) 191–197.

by some Plotinian scholars and revaluated by James Wilberding in a recent essay.<sup>23</sup> According to Wilberding, automatic or spontaneous action is non-deliberative action the sage performs without being drawn away from his contemplation of the intelligible. The practical action of the sage would follow effortlessly—at least in certain cases—from his contemplation, much as the World-Soul produces the sensible world without any deliberation, through the simple practice of contemplation. A compelling consequence of this is the fact that outwardly identical moral acts may derive from very different inner attitudes, which only involve deliberation and effort when performed by people who have not yet become sages.<sup>24</sup>

Be this as it may, even the sage who is frequently in touch with his transcendent Self has the chance to put his courage, temperance, justice and φρόνησις into practice; and φρόνησις, as already mentioned, is ‘the practical wisdom which has to do with discursive reason’ (*Enn.* 1.2 [19] 1.17). The term φρόνησις almost invariably has a cognitive meaning in Plotinus,<sup>25</sup> for it describes that virtue which rules the various intellectual activities. These must also include the lower contemplation of the embodied philosopher: a kind of contemplation which takes higher contemplation as its model, while presumably also being strengthened by it.

## II. Porphyry and Some Uncertain Points

Among the extant writings of Porphyry, *De abstinencia* and *Sentence* 32 are the most useful for the present enquiry.<sup>26</sup> Especially in the second half of the first book of *De abstinencia*, from chapter 28 onwards, several references are made to contemplation, which is praised as the source of divine goods and true happiness for human beings. Authentic contemplation cannot be disjoined from moral purification and must be addressed to the intelligible world only; through it, we can revert to what properly belongs to us:

<sup>23</sup> Wilberding (2008).

<sup>24</sup> This is somewhat reminiscent of the Stoic distinction between proper functions and right actions, and of the different quality of the acts performed *before* and *after* the formation of the Aristotelian moral *habitus*.

<sup>25</sup> φρόνησις and φρονεῖν in Plotinus almost always have an intellectual meaning; consider, for instance, Plot. *Enn.* 1.4 [36] 9.17–19; 1.6 [1] 6.6–13; 1.8 [51] 15.6–9; 3.6 [26] 6.16–17. See too Sleeman-Pollet (1980) coll. 1087–1088; and Catapano (1995) 52 and n. 26, 70–78. The same holds true for Porphyry: see the comments on *Sentence* 32 in Brisson (ed.) (2005) 2, 632.

<sup>26</sup> Interesting aspects were presumably developed by Porphyry in his lost *Commentary on the Philebus*; cf. Van Riel, this volume, 206.



the Being-Intellect from which we have departed when we acquired our corporeal nature. On the basis of *De abstinencia*, as well as other works by the philosopher, it is difficult to tell whether Porphyry followed in Plotinus' footsteps by postulating an undescended part of our soul.<sup>27</sup>

On the one hand, Porphyry often maintains that the human soul never suffers the loss of its intellectual core:

For the return is to one's real self, nothing else; and the joining is with one's real self, nothing else. And one's real self is the intellect, so the end is to live in accordance with the intellect. (Porph. *De abst.* 1.29.4; tr. Clark)

In the same way we too, if we are going to reascend from here to what is really ours, must put aside everything we have acquired from our mortal nature, and the attraction to those things which brought about our descent, and must recollect the blessed and eternal being and eagerly return to that which is without colour or quality [...]. For we were, and we still are, intellectual beings, pure from all perception and unreason.

(Porph. *De abst.* 1.30.4–6; tr. Clark)

On the other hand, Porphyry casts serious doubts as to the capacity of the embodied soul to preserve its connection with intelligible reality:

But we became involved with sensible because of our incapacity for eternal union with the intelligible and our capacity, so to call it, for what is here. For when the soul does not remain in the intelligible, all the capacities which are active through perception and the body germinate; they are like the effects of impoverishment in the earth, which often, though sown with wheat-seed, produces tares. The cause is a depravity of the soul, which does not destroy its own essence by producing unreason, but still, through unreason, is linked to mortality and dragged from its own to what is alien.

(Porph. *De abst.* 1.30.6–7; tr. Clark)

The intellect is with itself, even when we are not with it. But the person who has deviated from intellect is in the very place where he turned aside: he runs up and down attending to his apprehension of perception, and where the apprehension is, he is.

(Porph. *De abst.* 1.39.2; tr. Clark)

As it seems, however, Porphyry's main concern is to fight against the moral irresponsibility that could derive from a distorted interpretation of the Plotinian doctrine of the undescended soul:

<sup>27</sup> See esp. D'Ancona (2003) 49 and n. 105; Chiaradonna (2005) 42–47; Brisson (ed.) (2005) 1, 31–105, esp. 69–105. It should be noted that Iamblichus accused Porphyry of being inconsistent on the subject of the undescended soul: Πορφύριος δὲ ἐνδοιάζει (Iambl. *De anim.* 30.2–13 = Stob. *Anth.* 1.49.32.63–77).

Many barbarians, too, have been overthrown by thinking that someone impassioned by sensation can be active about the intelligibles. These people have engaged in every variety of pleasure because they despise it, saying that it is possible to be concerned with other things and leave unreason to deal with these.  
(Porph. *De abst.* 1.42.1; tr. Clark)

Clearly, this polemic is directed not against Plotinus, but against some Gnostics ('the barbarians') and—possibly—some Platonists who were influenced by them.<sup>28</sup> In the light of this, the least that can be said is that Porphyry did not light-heartedly side—if at all—with Plotinus on the question of the undescended soul.

Aside from this, it is necessary to address a major problem posed by late-Platonic epistemology. Each and every non-sceptical Platonist believes that philosophers can have some sort of access to the intelligible Forms or Ideas even during their lifetime. This begs the question as to whether this knowledge Platonic philosophers can attain is complete and ultimate or partial and limited. In Plotinus' view, to be sure, whenever a philosopher is consciously involved in the noetic life of his undescended soul, he attains perfect knowledge of true Being, which is to say of the Forms in their mutual interrelation. This knowledge can also be acquired in one's lifetime, and it is on the basis of this idea that Plotinus developed his unique theory of knowledge, which in recent times has been studied in much detail by Riccardo Chiaradonna.<sup>29</sup> But what—we may ask—about Platonists who do not accept the Plotinian doctrine of the undescended soul? According to their perspective, how can the embodied philosopher have full access to the true Ideas which abide in the Being-Intellect?<sup>30</sup> Perhaps, as the *Phaedo* explains, this philosopher will have to wait for the final separation of his soul from his body before contemplating the Ideas again in their purity, contenting himself, during his lifetime, with knowing only copies of them.<sup>31</sup> Alternatively, contact with the intelligible world may fully be restored through magic or theurgy: operations, that is, which have little or nothing to do with philosophy. These crucial questions—which Elena Gritti has carefully explored in a recent monograph—can be given no easy answer.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Steel (1978) 38 and n. 21 (54 and n. 21 in the Italian ed.); and Clark (2000) 139 and n. 152 ad loc.

<sup>29</sup> See esp. Chiaradonna (2005); (2009a) 102–115.

<sup>30</sup> While Plotinus totally equates intelligible Being with Intellect, Proclus (probably influenced by Iamblichus) conceives Being as prior to Intellect: according to the philosopher, the archetypal Forms, which constitute Being, are hypostatically prior to Intellect. See Gritti (2008) 96 and n. 95, with further bibliographical references.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Plat. *Phaed.* 66a–68c. This point is rightly stressed by Trabattoni (1998) 130–138.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Gritti (2008).

In *Sentence* 32, Porphyry codifies many arguments drawn from the Plotinian treatise *On Virtues*, implementing changes—but to what extent, interpreters disagree.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, this *Sentence* presents the virtues of the θεατής, the person able to exercise perfect contemplation without any impediment, as the third step in a four-tiered hierarchy of virtues: the ‘political’, already considered in relation to Plotinus; the ‘purificatory’, by means of which the soul frees itself from bodily passions; the virtues connected to contemplation, which are not assigned any specific name by Porphyry, but which later came to be known as ‘theoretical’ virtues;<sup>34</sup> and finally ‘paradigmatic’ or ‘exemplary’ virtues, the archetypical models of virtue existing in the Being-Intellect. Virtues of the third kind—the ones relevant to our argument—make a ‘god’ of the person who lives according to them. While they are divided into the four traditional political virtues, these acquire new meaning at this stage in the moral progression of the philosopher:<sup>35</sup> ‘(At this level), wisdom, both theoretical and practical, consists in the contemplation of the contents of intellect; justice is the fulfilling (by each of the parts of the soul) of the role proper to it in following upon intellect and directing its activity towards intellect; moderation is the internal conversion (of the soul) towards intellect; and courage is detachment from the passions through which the soul assimilates itself to that towards which it turns its gaze, which is itself free from passions’ (*Sent.* 32.57–61 Brisson; tr. Dillon).

Theoretical virtues thus properly belong to the person who, having freed himself from the bonds of the body, can act purely according to the Intellect. Once the philosopher has become god-like, his soul can be imagined as permanently situated within the second Hypostasis, the Being-Intellect. This is closely reminiscent of the Plotinian doctrine of the undescended soul, although—as previously noted—it is very difficult to discern Porphyry’s

<sup>33</sup> See esp. Catapano (2006a) and (2006b) 39–41. Catapano does not underestimate the differences between Plotinus and Porphyry—and rightly so, I would add.

<sup>34</sup> Starting from Procl. *In Remp.* 1.13.5. Cf. Saffrey-Segonds (2001) LXIX–C, esp. LXXXVIII–XC.

<sup>35</sup> According to Catapano, the pivotal notion in the Neoplatonic doctrine of the degrees of virtues is that ‘per ciascuna delle quattro virtù fondamentali (saggezza, coraggio, temperanza, giustizia), esistano diversi livelli di significato, corrispondenti a diversi ambiti operativi e a diverse forme di vita. È possibile così stabilire una gerarchia progressiva degli abiti virtuosi, in cui ogni grado rappresenta un particolare stadio di perfezionamento morale, da un minimo a un massimo. Il criterio che permette di classificare i vari gradi è fornito dall’assimilazione al divino; inferiori sono i gradi che assimilano di meno, superiori quelli che assimilano di più. La vita morale è concepita in quest’ottica come un itinerario ascendente dell’anima scandito in tappe’ (Catapano [2006b] 38).

exact take on this subject. Furthermore, the philosopher's 'assimilation to a god' (or to the divine) proves somewhat incomplete at this level, given that it can only be perfected at the next stage of virtue (the fourth and final one): 'In view of this, then, he who acts in accordance with the practical virtues is agreed to be "a good man", he who acts in accordance with the purificatory ones is a daemonic man, or even a good daemon, one who acts only according to those which are directed towards intellect is a god, and one who practises the paradigmatic virtues is a "father of gods" (θεῶν πατήρ)' (*Sent.* 32.89–94 Brisson; tr. Dillon). Similar statements are to be found in *Enneads* 1.2 [19] 6.1–7, where the human rational soul, purified and in possession of the higher virtues, is actually said to become a god, yet with a remarkable restriction: for it becomes 'one of those gods who follow the First (θεός δὲ τῶν ἐπομένων τῷ πρώτῳ)' (6–7).<sup>36</sup>

Evidently, even according to the Plotinian doctrine of the undescended soul, the human soul lacks something for it to be in every respect identical to Intellect, and it is for Intellect alone to be strictly called 'divine'.<sup>37</sup> It is true that the undescended soul permanently dwells in the intelligible realm, but its ontological status is not quite that of Forms (or Ideas).<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, as the undescended soul has direct access to the archetypal Forms, we may conclude that for Plotinus these represent the object of the theoretical virtues. What, then, are the objects of the theoretical virtues for the Neoplatonists who rejected the thesis of the undescended soul?<sup>39</sup> Their epistemology must no doubt have been in many respects different from that of Plotinus. According to Proclus, for instance, the true intelligible Forms transcend human nature, and no privileged part of our soul exists that is

<sup>36</sup> This is a clear reference to *Phaedrus* 246e–247a, where Zeus is said to be the 'first' of the heavenly train, 'followed' by the eleven groups of gods and daemons. Considering that Zeus is 'the Father of the Gods', I wonder why interpreters do not take the *Phaedrus* passage into account to explain the expression θεῶν πατήρ in *Sentence* 32. To my knowledge, the debate is chiefly focused on the problematic relation between Neoplatonism and the Chaldaic tradition. On this, see Lewy (1978<sup>2</sup>) 465–466; Saffrey (1990) 95–107, esp. 103–107; Brisson (ed.) (2005) 2, 639–640. When commenting on *Sentence* 32, Brisson and Flamand quite rightly adduce *Enn.* 5.5 [32] 3.20–21, where Zeus is called 'Father of the Gods'.

<sup>37</sup> For the 'divine' nature of Being-Intellect, see the enneadic passages listed in Sleeman-Pollet (1980) coll. 497.29–498.18.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. D'Ancona (2002) 560. It would seem that in the intelligible realm there are both Forms and Souls (as it contains the divine 'part' of each soul).

<sup>39</sup> Only Theodorus of Asine unreservedly accepted the Plotinian doctrine of the undescended soul (cf. Procl. *In Tim.* 3.333.28–30= Test. 36 in Deuse [1973]), whereas Iamblichus, Proclus and others rejected it. On this subject, see the excellent overview provided in D'Ancona (2003) 47–65 and 206–208.

able to enter in contact with them during our lifetime. All that human beings can grasp in their lifetime are 'images' of the transcendent Forms, which is to say 'psychic' Forms very distant from the former.<sup>40</sup> We should always keep this point in mind, although—as it seems—it does not really affect the various Neoplatonic views on the theoretical virtues and the contemplative life.

### III. *After Porphyry: A Brief Survey*

Contemplative life does not play a significant role in the extant writings of Neoplatonists after Porphyry, with the exception of Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*, a rather peculiar work. This was written as a praise of the Pythagorean way of life addressed to non-initiates, who are exhorted to turn to philosophy by disdaining pleasures and wealth and practicing virtues, and particularly *theoria*, the crowning glory of the philosophical life. Because of its preparatory character, the *Protrepticus* deals with contemplative life in a rather generic way. As largely a collection of Pythagorean, Platonic and Aristotelian texts, it is not representative of the specific Neoplatonic stance (although clearly it contains nothing that Neoplatonists would not accept).<sup>41</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the later Neoplatonists rarely engaged with the issue of the contemplative life, for in the cultural climate of late Antiquity the primacy of contemplation and spirituality over practical and political philosophy was taken as a given. The superiority of the theoretical virtues over the civic ones was also taken for granted, even though in the Latin West some Neoplatonists were inclined to confer the utmost value to the

<sup>40</sup> On this subject, see Steel (1997); Procl. *In Parm.* 4.948.12–38 Cousin (= 12–30 Steel). The importance of this Proclean passage has adequately been stressed by Van den Berg (2000); and Chiaradonna (2005). On the other hand, Proclus also sought to reevaluate some epistemological views of Plotinus (see Gritti [2008] esp. 67–120= cap. II: 'La natura dell'anima'). On the complex hierarchy of ideal Forms in Neoplatonism, see Steel (1987) 124; and Linguisti (2005) 258–259.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Dillon (1987) 902: 'No treatise of Iamblichus' specifically concerned with ethics survives, so that we have to piece together his doctrine from what evidence we can derive from other works. A treatise such as the *Protrepticus* might be thought to give evidence of his ethical doctrine, and it is in fact useful, but not as much as might be expected. For one thing, it is largely a cento of quotations, so that one can only deduce Iamblichus' views from the authorities he uses. From these, however, one may conclude that, like Plotinus and Porphyry, he inclined to the more austere tradition of Platonism, influenced by Stoicism and Pythagoreanism rather than by Peripateticism, which favoured extirpation of the passions rather than their moderation, and held that virtue alone was sufficient to happiness, independent of bodily and external goods. The 'end of life' is 'Likeness to God' (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ), which is to be attained by γνῶσις.'

latter as well.<sup>42</sup> Be that as it may, with the exception of a few passages where the conflict between the practical (or political) life and the contemplative is described in almost strictly Platonic terms,<sup>43</sup> mentions of the βίος θεωρητικός are few and fleeting.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, it is better to briefly consider how later Neoplatonists conceived of the contemplative (or theoretical) virtues within the doctrine of the degrees of virtues. The most interesting texts in this respect are: Marin. *Vit. Procli* 22–25; Ammon. *In De int.* 135.12–32; Dam. *In Phaed.* 1 §§ 138–144; Olympiod. *In Phaed.* 1 §§ 4.9–5.9; 8 §§ 2–3; and *In Alc.* 4.15–5.9; 215.1–12; 222.4–223.3.<sup>45</sup> These texts provide a remarkably coherent description of the contemplative virtues. All of them maintain that:

1. Human beings can properly exert the theoretical virtues only after having cut off all links with the body; only after completing the process of purification from passions, can we act according to what is most ‘divine’ in us.<sup>46</sup>
2. Theoretical φρόνησις corresponds to intuitive thought, and as such is superior to all discursive and demonstrative reasoning.<sup>47</sup>
3. The objects of the theoretical virtues are entities whose nature is ‘better’ (χρείττω) and more divine than the human.<sup>48</sup>
4. For this reason, the highest perfection of the Intellect cannot be attained by means of the theoretical virtues, but only through the

<sup>42</sup> See esp. Macrobius *In Somn.* 1.8 and Di Pasquale Barbanti (1988) 97–112, with further bibliographical references.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Procl. *In Parm.* 4.931.18–24 Cousin (= 14–18 Steel): ‘Plato demonstrates this truth when he presents our life as double, having both a political and a theoretical aspect, and happiness similarly as double, and traces the one life back to the patronymic supervision of Zeus, and the other to the order of Cronus and pure Mind’ (tr. Morrow-Dillon; see also Dam. *In Phileb.* § 10; § 231, Van Riel).

<sup>44</sup> See, however, the valuable study of this topic in Damascius offered by Van Riel, this volume, 199–212.

<sup>45</sup> H.D. Saffrey and A.Ph. Segonds (see their ‘Introduction’ in Saffrey-Segonds [2001] LXXff.) list twenty-four sources (from Plotinus to Eustratius of Nicea) that provide evidence for the Neoplatonic doctrine of the degrees of virtues. In my enquiry, I have not taken account of Byzantine texts, nor, clearly, of texts which do not contain any reference to the doctrine at issue or of texts which deal with theoretical virtues in a superficial and conventional manner.

<sup>46</sup> See esp. Olympiod. *In Alc.* 5.6–7; *In Phaed.* 8, § 2.11–12.

<sup>47</sup> See esp. Marin. *Vit. Procli* 22.5–15 (p. 26 Saffrey-Segonds).

<sup>48</sup> See esp. Dam. *In Phaed.* 1 § 142; Olympiod. *In Alc.* 215.9–10; Ammon. *In De int.* 135.12–32. With reference to Iamblichus, Dillon (1987) 903 writes: ‘These [*scil.* the theoretical virtues] are the virtues of a soul which has already abandoned itself and turned to what is above it. These are the converse of the ‘civic’ virtues, inasmuch as the latter concern the reason in so far as it directs itself towards what is inferior to it, whereas the former are concerned with the reason’s striving towards what is superior to it’.

paradigmatic virtues; only the latter are capable of leading to the apprehension of the intelligible Forms, as through the theoretical virtues the philosopher can only grasp Forms of a lower rank, namely the intellectualive.<sup>49</sup>

The above exposition agrees with the views of Plotinus and Porphyry. It is evidently the case that the acceptance or rejection of the doctrine of the undescended soul neither impinges on the value of the theoretical virtues nor changes the fact that these are subordinate to the paradigmatic virtues. According to Plotinus, theoretical virtues pertain to primary Forms, while according to later Neoplatonists, they pertain to secondary Forms: the psychic or intellectualive Forms situated on a lower level of reality than the intelligible. Still, in both cases contemplation can at the most make us similar to God and not identical to him.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See esp. Dam. *In Phaed.* 1 § 143; and Olymp. *In Phaed* 8 § 2–3.

<sup>50</sup> To comparable conclusions comes apparently Van Riel in this volume, 212.





## DAMASCIUS ON THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

Gerd Van Riel

### I. *The Contemplative Virtues*

In his commentary on the *Phaedo*, Damascius provides a survey of the different virtues and their hierarchic structure.<sup>1</sup> Refusing to add the virtues that are mixed with their counterparts (as they are 'of no value whatever and can be found even in slaves': *In Phaed.* 1 § 145.3), Damascius concentrates on the pure virtues, not attended by vices. This list of virtues is drawn on the basis of the hierarchic structure of the faculties (or levels of being) to which each virtue belongs.<sup>2</sup> As virtues are always perfections of the soul (§ 151.1–2), they occur at any stage the soul's versatile existence can reach. They are perfections in the sense of imposing order on the chaotic, or as Damascius explains this further, of realizing on a lower level that which exists in purity higher up (§ 151.4–13).

(1) The virtues belonging to the first class, the *natural virtues*, are typical of the soul's connection with the body (the so-called *χρᾶσις*). As a consequence of this low status, those virtues are often conflicting with one another, and they are found in humans as well as in animals. Although Damascius does not exemplify this class of virtues, he refers to Plato's *Statesman* and *Laws*. Here we find discussions of primitive natural inclinations that have to be shaped by the educators and the lawgiver. These natural inclinations are, for instance, courage and temperance that are not led by reason.<sup>3</sup> (2) The second class of virtues contains the *ethical virtues*, which belong to reason and the irrational parts of the soul simultaneously. They are 'acquired by

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<sup>1</sup> Dam. *In Phaed.* 1 §§ 138–151.

<sup>2</sup> This list of the virtues does not stand alone in the Platonic tradition. The classification of the virtues was started by Plotinus *Enn.* 1.2, and systematized by Porphyry (*Sent.* 32). In later Neoplatonism one finds quite a large number of lists and classifications of virtues. A fine study of these classifications is provided in Saffrey-Segonds (2001) LXIX–XCVIII. Gertz (2011) 51–70 thoroughly discusses the relation between the 'civic' and the purificatory (and contemplative) ways of life in (among others) Damascius' *In Phaed.*

<sup>3</sup> *Polit.* 306a–308b; *Leg.* 12.963c–e. Cf. Westerink (1977) 84.

habituation and by a sort of true opinion, and can be found in well-educated children and in some animals' (§139); they do not conflict with each other, as they stand above the *κρᾶσις*. (3) The *civic virtues* belong to reason only, that is, reason in its function of controlling the irrational: 'by prudence it governs the cognitive faculty, by fortitude the spirit, by temperance desire and all together by justice' (§140). These are the classic moral virtues as treated by Plato in the *Republic* (4.434d–445b). (4) The *purifying virtues* belong to reason only, 'but to reason in so far as it withdraws from everything external into itself' (§141). The main Platonic passage is the one Damascius is presently commenting upon (*Phaedo* 68c–69c). (5) The *contemplative virtues*, which we shall discuss in more detail below. (6) The *paradigmatic virtues* belong to the soul that has left the level of contemplation (and of the distance, *ἀπόστασις* involved in contemplation). It is now partaking of the intellect that is the Paradigm of all things (§143). It is telling that to exemplify this class, Damascius does not refer to Plato any longer, but rather says that this class was added by Iamblichus in his (lost) treatise *On Virtues*. (7) Finally, the *hieratic virtues* 'belong to the godlike part of the soul; they correspond to all the categories mentioned above, on the difference that while the others belong to being, these are unitary' (§144.1–3). That is to say, the lower virtues are taken up here in a mode of existence that is entirely unified.<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this class, again, Damascius does not refer to Plato, but rather to Iamblichus and the school of Proclus.

The discussion of this list is issued, as stated already, by the reference to the purifying virtues in the *Phaedo*. Yet it gives important clues also about the nature of the contemplative virtues. It is worthwhile to quote the paragraph devoted to them in full:

142. Before these are the contemplative virtues, when the soul has finally abandoned even itself, or rather has joined the superior, not in the way of knowledge only, as the word might seem to suggest, but in the way of appetite as well: it is as if the soul aspires to become intelligence instead of soul, and intelligence is both cognition and appetite. They are the counterpart of the civic virtues; the action of the latter is directed on the inferior and proceeds by reason, while the contemplative virtues are directed on the superior and proceed by intellection. Plato treats of them in the *Theaetetus* [173c6–177c2].  
(tr. Westerink)

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<sup>4</sup> The final characterization of the virtues involved here remains unclear, which leads Westerink (1977) 86 to the phlegmatic conclusion that 'for the hieratic virtues there was always the excuse that they are beyond the range of philosophy'.

The contemplative virtues display two characteristic elements, which were already their feoff in Porphyry's analysis:<sup>5</sup> they adhere to the intellect (νοῦς) rather than to reason (λόγος, being the faculty at stake in the civic virtues), and their action is directed to the superior level of reality, rather than, like the civic virtues, to the inferior ones (the civic virtues being the controllers of the irrational). Thus, the contemplative virtues are virtues that consist in the operation of the intellect, elevating our soul to the superior level of reality. In that sense, they are distinct from the purifying virtues (which occupy the level between the civic and the contemplative virtues): the latter were virtues of reason, detached from the involvement in the lower, but still operating at the level of reason.

These contemplative virtues are perfective, as they occur in the soul that adheres to a transcendent mode of existence, and directs itself towards the superior. In that sense, this class of virtues displays a dynamic aspect, belonging to the soul 'underway' to the level of the intellect. Only in the sixth stage (the paradigmatic virtues) has the soul actually reached the stage of the Intellect, and transcended the distance (ἀπόστασις) that characterizes contemplation.<sup>6</sup> Hence, it is important for Damascius to stress that the soul at the stage of contemplation is not just thinking, but also longing: 'it aspires to become intelligence', § 142.3–4. In keeping with that, Damascius emphasizes that contemplation is not just about knowledge, 'as the word might suggest', but also about appetite. Thus, the distance between seer and seen involved in contemplation plays an important role in the definition of the virtues that go along with it. Moreover, even when the distance is overcome, when the level of the Intellect is eventually reached, there still will be appetite, as 'the intelligence is both cognition and appetite' (§ 142.4).

This characterization is strikingly parallel with what we find in Damascius' *Commentary on the Philebus*. As I argued elsewhere, Damascius immediately (as early as § 13) redefines the *Philebus*' overall theme of 'the mixture of pleasure and intellect' into being 'the mixture of desire and cognition'. This reformulation is far from innocuous. Desire being the typical function of the lower parts of the soul, it is also asserted to exist at the level of cognition. There are cognitive desires, as Damascius goes on to explain: the pleasurable disposition (τὸ διατίθεσθαι ἡδέως) cognition experiences when it attains its proper object (γνωστόν) is due to the participation of cognition in

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Linguiti, in this volume, 193.

<sup>6</sup> In *Phaed.* 1 § 143.2: τὸ γὰρ θεωρεῖν σὺν ἀποστάσει γίνεται. Cf. Plotin. *Enn.* 6.7 [38] 15–17.

desire (§ 13.3–5). Cognition, on the other hand, is the privilege of the higher part of the soul, but it also exists in the lower parts, as the soul's recognition that something is lacking in the organism and needs to be attended to (see §§ 157 and 160).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the mixture of the *Philebus* is modified. It no longer concerns two different components (corporeal pleasure and the intellect) that are brought together, but rather two distinct faculties, cognition and desire, that are combined at all different levels of living beings. The point is now, that desire is not taken to be identical with pleasure. Emphatically not, as it appears from 13.2–3:

How can intellect be the opposite of pleasure? In the first place, it is rather desire that is contradistinguished from cognition, and desire and pleasure are not identical; besides, there is also a certain pleasure in cognition.

(*In Phileb.* § 13.1–3)

What Damascius is trying to achieve here, is to state that both elements of the mixture may yield pleasure. This is an extremely important step, which is at the heart of his interpretation of the *Philebus*. Pleasure is no longer one of the two components of the mixed good, but it is something that can occur in both elements of the mixed goal, in desire, that is, as well as in cognition.<sup>8</sup>

For this purpose, Damascius reformulates the terms yet another time: he now goes on to speak, not of desire and cognition, but more generally, of 'a way to an end', and the 'end', or the attainment itself:

we may say that the analogue of the appetitive function is the urge to inquiry; for inquiry can be described as cognitive desire, being a way to an end, just as desire is directed to an end; cognition, however, is attainment of truth, and its analogue is attainment of desire.

(*In Phileb.* § 13.5–9)

Of course, desire primarily constitutes the 'way to the end', and cognition always is a kind of attainment of the truth. But the reformulation serves to show that there is a way to the end in cognition too, just as in desire there is an attainment of the desired object.

<sup>7</sup> See Van Riel (2000) 145–147.

<sup>8</sup> A similar point is made in *De Principiis*, where Damascius derives the desire of all layers for the higher one (and hence also the ascent) from the need present at every level, which makes that level look for a repletion from above. Concerning the level of the intellect (*De Principiis* 1.34.9–35.13), Damascius argues that the intelligible is the specific object of desire for intellect, and even though the need of the intellect is always to some degree fulfilled (as it is its own object of intellection: 35.10), there is, logically speaking, a scheme of need and fulfilment in place at that level also (35.11–12); cf. *De Principiis* 2.150.19–24.

Thus, the whole issue appears to revolve around a distinction between *process* and *end*, movement and rest. There is a process of cognitive desire, resulting in knowledge as 'hitting the target' (τεῦξις), just as the structure of desire at a non-cognitive level can be divided into the process and the attainment.<sup>9</sup>

Returning to the passage taken from *In Phaedonem*, we now have the tools to understand why contemplation involves a kind of appetite. Moreover, this appetite is the basis of the contemplative life's being pleasurable and hence, meeting the *Philebus*' requirement of being a good life, containing both intellect and pleasure.

## II. The Contemplative βίος

Obviously, the discussion of the contemplative virtues entails an analysis of the so-called contemplative life. The steady acquirement of the virtues yields a habitual state, or a βίος. In Damascius' commentary on the *Phaedo*, one finds a threefold division of different lives, which complements the classification of the virtues. As Damascius points out,

Soul has a threefold activity, the object being both the soul itself and what exists on either side, the lower and the higher; hence the three levels of life. In each of these the soul can choose three different ways, as we have already said:<sup>10</sup> in social life that of ruling the lower, or of finding within itself the principles of its actions, or of looking up towards causes higher than soul; in the life of purification there are the ways of drawing back from the lower, of developing its own essential type, or of seeking the principles from which it has sprung; and the same obviously holds of the contemplative life, in which the soul considers the superior entities either as exerting providence over the lower degrees of being, or as remaining within themselves, or as connected with what is beyond. (*In Phaed.* 1 § 74, tr. Westerink)

This text is important for more than one reason. First, in this passage, Damascius accepts only three lives, corresponding with three stages of the virtues: the civic (or 'social'), the purifying, and the contemplative virtues. The two stages below the civic virtues (natural and ethical virtues), as well as the two stages above the contemplative virtues (the paradigmatic and the hieratic ones) are apparently not countered by a βίος. Damascius does

<sup>9</sup> See Van Riel (2000) 149–153.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *In Phaed.* 1 § 65, where the threefold structure (the soul towards the inferior—towards itself—towards the superior) is introduced, and 1 § 67, where this scheme is applied to the life of purification.

not explain why this is so, but the answer may be close at hand. For the two lowest ones, the explanation might be that they do not entail fully fledged reason (they are either primitive inclinations, not led by reason, i.e. the natural virtues, or precursors of rational behavior, i.e. the ethical virtues), and hence, that they cannot be the basis of an (adult) life. For the highest ones, one might infer that they cannot be steady life states: fully partaking in the intellect (in the case of the paradigmatic virtues) or in the One (with the hieratic virtues) is not a 'life' either, but rather a disposition that can be reached every now and then by people who have the corresponding virtue. Hence, if this is correct, there are only three conceivable 'life states': the social/civic life, the purifying life, and the contemplative life, the latter obviously being the highest achievable one.

Furthermore, this passage complements the analysis of the virtues by introducing three levels of every single life: one in which the soul is occupied by the inferior, one in which it envisages its own activities on that level, and one in which it looks up to the superior. In the case of the contemplative life, the soul is entirely characterized by viewing the superior entities, even in the activity with relation to the lower. This activity is devoid of action (as opposed to the social life, which rules the lower), and devoid of the ongoing attempt to draw back from the lower. Instead, the activity towards the lower now entails a view by which the superior principles are viewed as exerting providence over the inferior ones. The recognition of providence thus belongs to the specific nature of the contemplative life. It is a regard that is not involved in the lower things, by controlling them or by escaping from them, but that takes them up in a unified grasp of the coherence of all things, thus seeing how they are part of a providential structure. In the second mode, the contemplative life views the principles in themselves, meaning that the soul has come to settle at this level, leading a life in accordance with intellect. Yet this is not the final stage: in the third mode, the principles are also seen in connection with what is beyond them, by which Damascius intimates that the contemplative life is still transcended by ulterior principles. It is not itself the highest possible performance of the highest achievable activity. As we shall see, this is the element that decisively makes the Neoplatonists deviate from the Aristotelian view, even though, as we will see, Damascius endorses the Aristotelian position as far as he can.

### III. *Characteristics of the Contemplative Life*

When looking for further characterizations of the contemplative life according to Damascius, one may turn to his analysis in the *Philebus* commentary. Even though, admittedly, references to the contemplative life as such are scarce in this work (as in the other preserved works by Damascius), one can find important clues in a close reading of his analysis of the 'mixed life' in the *Philebus*. First and foremost, this mixed life is 'life in accordance with intellect'. For, as Damascius' interpretation points out, this mixture is ultimately not about bringing together heterogeneous or even conflicting elements like (corporeal) pleasure and intellect, but rather about the unimpeded activity of the intellect, which, as a fulfillment of the intellect's proper desire, yields a pleasure that is connatural to it. As Damascius says at the end of his commentary:

The mixed way of life has the characteristics of the preferable, for it is the only life that is perfect, adequate and desirable; intellect has the characteristics of cognition, while the soul is the first to show those of pleasure. It is true that pleasure also exists in the intellect, but as the essence of the intellect and a kind of thought; for there is, in the intellect, no division that could make thought and pleasure distinct functions.

(*In Phileb.* § 257, tr. Westerink modified)

In agreement with the *Philebus*, where perfection, adequacy and desirability are the main criteria to decide which life is preferable (*Phileb.* 20c–d), Damascius now indicates that the mixed life (the life of intellect and pleasure) meets these criteria. Yet Damascius hastens to add that pleasure is not limited to lower existents (starting from the soul), but that it is present in the intellect itself, or even that it coincides with the intellect's being: the intellect *is* a kind of enjoyment, and its pleasure is a kind of thought. This bold statement does not make Damascius a hedonist, even though the argument in itself (that the preferability of the good life is grounded on the pleasure it yields) has a hedonistic flavor. The point is, rather, that, in line with the Aristotelian analysis, the perfect performance of an activity is naturally and automatically accompanied by pleasure, a pleasure that is typical of the activity of that sort. In that sense, pleasure remains a by-product or accompanying element of the activity,<sup>11</sup> but it cannot not occur when the activity is perfected.

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., *In Phileb.* §§ 35.1; 94.5; 218.7.

The point is, now, that this 'mixed life' is in fact the contemplative life. This idea underlies a remark Damascius makes in the preliminary discussion of general issues concerning the interpretation of the *Philebus*. Referring to a discussion between Porphyry and Iamblichus, he asks whose account is to be followed:

Which takes the more plausible view: Porphyry, who assigns the first place to the life guided by intellect, or Iamblichus, who prefers the 'mixed life'? As a matter of fact they do not really disagree; for Porphyry understands by intellect its most perfect grade and by pleasure the irrational kind, while Iamblichus means the pleasure that is inherent in intellect and, when he speaks of intellect, only the cognitive quality, as also does Plato. Porphyry, therefore, actually prefers the combined way of life, that is to say, the contemplative life, which delights in itself and what is prior to it, but no less in its own undisturbed activities; but he calls it the intellectual life after its prevailing characteristic. (In *Phileb.* §10, tr. Westerink modified)

In this harmonizing reading, one might say, Damascius swings the apparent contradiction between Porphyry and Iamblichus so that they end up agreeing both with each other and with Plato himself, i.e., that they both are reading Plato in the right way. This right reading consists in saying that the pleasure in the good life is the one that is inherent in the activity of intellect, and that this 'combined life' is the contemplative life. The difference lies in the fact that Porphyry uses the word 'pleasure' to refer to the irrational pleasure only—in that sense, the mixed life becomes a mixture of incommensurate elements. However, looking further than what meets the eye, or so Damascius would have it, it becomes clear that Porphyry himself accepts that the unimpeded activity of the intellect yields a specific kind of pleasure, and that the intellect delights in itself and in what is prior to it. The only difference is that Porphyry indicates this life with another term: the 'intellectual life', or indeed the 'contemplative life'. But the message is that Porphyry's intellectual or contemplative life is exactly the same as what Iamblichus would call the 'mixed life'. Iamblichus has the better reading, says Damascius, as he uses the terms in the way Plato designed them, but conceptually they are in agreement.

From this incidental remark we may deduce that Damascius considered the *Philebus* to provide an account of the contemplative life, in the sense that it explains how the activity of the intellect involves desire and the fulfillment of it, this fulfillment being the pleasure of the mixed life. Of course, this is not about any combination of pleasure and intellect. As if he needs to stress this, Damascius points out explicitly (*In Phileb.* §231) that the contemplative life is the first or the highest mixed life, containing the



highest pleasures and the highest types of cognition, whereas the second mixed life is the civic one (πολιτικός having the same meaning here as in the discussion of the virtues). Yet to this received opinion (probably put forward by Proclus in his commentary on the *Philebus*), Damascius adds the following:

maybe this life [i.e., the first mixed life] needs all kinds of cognition; for it can get hold of contemplation, though not all the time. (*In Phileb.* § 231.5–6)

This means, I take it, that just as Plato would have it (*Phileb.* 62d4–6) all types of knowledge are allowed access to the mixed life. The reason for this is parallel to what we read in Plato, who argues that we need knowledge of impure things besides knowledge of the divine, because we would not even find our way home if we only knew the divine.<sup>12</sup> Damascius takes this up by saying that we need all kinds of cognition because we cannot contemplate all the time.<sup>13</sup>

All of this is very much in agreement with Aristotle's analysis of happiness and contemplation in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Indeed, the identification of the contemplative activity with the pleasure it yields comes directly from Aristotle, and it follows upon Aristotle's own definition of pleasure as the connatural side-effect of a perfectly realized activity.<sup>14</sup> It is evident that the interpretation of the life according to the intellect follows Aristotle's characterization of the contemplative life.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle also points out that our nature, as human beings, is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation,<sup>16</sup> which is echoed by Damascius' statement that we cannot contemplate all the time.

Yet there is an important difference: Damascius fails (or apparently, refuses) to refer to this highest activity as 'happiness' (εὐδαιμονία). The term is used only seven times in all extant works of Damascius, and only one occurrence is to be found in the *Philebus* commentary, which would be the privileged work to look for such occurrences. This absence of the term is all

<sup>12</sup> Plat. *Phileb.* 62b.

<sup>13</sup> I must admit that my own translation of the quoted passage in the Budé edition ('car elle touche aux connaissances contemplatives, même si ce n'est pas au plus haut degré') is not accurate. Also Westerink's translation misses the point, or is at least misleading: 'Or does this life to need *all* forms of knowledge? For it has some points of contact with contemplative knowledge, though these are not far-reaching'.

<sup>14</sup> *Eth. Nic.* 10.4.1174b31–33 combined with 7.13.1153a12–15. See Van Riel (2000) 50–58.

<sup>15</sup> *Eth. Nic.* 10.7.1177a12–18.

<sup>16</sup> *Eth. Nic.* 10.9.1178 33–35.

the more striking as Damascius' analyses are very much similar to Aristotle's. Hence we need to inquire how Damascius accounts for 'happiness', and how this happiness is linked to a specific pleasure.

#### IV. *The Contemplative Life and Its Pleasure*

Instead of εὐδαιμονία, Damascius uses the words τέλος, τεῦξις, ἀποπλήρωσις, ἐν τέλει εἶναι and so on, which of course are not bound to the particular state of happiness alone: they indicate any achievement of the aim at any level. But there are passages where Damascius is more specific about this highest achievable state, and he seems to have a distinct preference for the originally Stoic term of εὐπάθεια, and for ῥαστώνη and εὐφροσύνη (or εὐφραίνεσθαι). These terms, however scarcely used as well, are the most precise indications of what Damascius understands as happiness. In general, they are used as synonyms of the pleasure we have in the achievement of the highest activity.

In the Neoplatonic tradition, these terms are normally used to indicate the 'absence of burden' and the 'bliss' with which the gods perform their activity—an activity that consists in two elements: providence and transmitting the good to lower realms.<sup>17</sup>

What is, then, the activity to which Damascius attributes this characteristic? We already encountered the term εὐπάθεια in §13, where it is used to indicate the pleasure of attainment—a 'higher order', that is, without explaining the exact nature of it. But here, Damascius subscribes to the traditional remark that this is no genuine pleasure (a view which he will not maintain). At §87, we get a clearer view. Here, the εὐπάθεια is linked to the τεῦξις of truth by the intellect:

The isolation of intellect is forced and impossible, for great is the love of truth, and so is the well-being (εὐπάθεια) in the attainment of it. In general, any undisturbed activity in its natural condition is attended by pleasure, so that this must be true of cognitive activity too. (87.1–4)

This is a clear indication that εὐπάθεια is exclusively linked to the unimpeded activity of the intellect. And although Plato argued that a life of intellect alone is not desirable, Damascius takes the opposite stance: the life of the intellect is the best one can achieve, and—here we see what was at stake in the modification of the terminology of the mixture—it yields the highest

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Van Riel (2008) CX–CXIV.

pleasure. Hence, again with some elasticity, Damascius attributes a distinct pleasure to what Plato had called the neutral life (a life, that is, without any pleasure or pain):

In the neutral state, in which there is neither pleasure nor pain, we are evidently not subject to any violent affection; but there may be a pleasant state of well-being (εὐπάθεια), especially as nature carries on its own activity without disturbances. But even supposing that we experience a pleasure of this kind, it is attended by a perception equally devoid of violence; and so, if you take changes that cause no perception at all, you will have the life that is here called 'neutral' in a very appropriate way. (190.1–6)

This again is an astonishing example of creative interpretation. Apparently, Damascius identifies the 'neutral condition' with the 'natural condition', something which Plato, in my view, did not intend. Moreover, the name 'μηδέτερος βίος', which Plato used to indicate a condition fully detached from all pleasure and pain, becomes a paradox here: in Damascius' interpretation, this condition is not exempt from pleasure and pain; his aim is precisely to show that there is pleasure in this condition after all. The 'neutrality' of this state is reduced to its having quiet pleasures, instead of the more violent ones in lower activities.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the mixture of pleasure and intellect of the *Philebus* is turned into an intellectualistic interpretation of the good life, placing the highest pleasure in the activity of the νοῦς.

This can also be deduced from §155, where Damascius establishes an entire hierarchy of the different kinds of pleasure, describing the pleasure that occurs in the essence (οὐσία) of the intellect as the 'very paradigm of pleasure'. It is this pleasure, then, this well-being, that will reveal to us the true nature of happiness. It can hardly be a surprise that this pleasure is described as 'pure' or 'true' pleasure, just like Plato considered only this type of pleasure as a serious candidate to enter the mixture of the good life.

Damascius discusses this pure pleasure in §§ 203–214 of his commentary, where he states that those pure pleasures are attendant upon the perfect achievement of the natural condition, and that they are purely active (ἐνεργητικά). Moreover, he gives some examples of these pleasures, which are of peculiar interest. The list of examples includes the following:

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<sup>18</sup> With this identification, Damascius deviates from Plato: in the latter's view, the 'neutral condition' is the absence of all pleasure and pain, because lack and repletion are so small that they cannot be experienced. The 'natural condition', on the other hand, is the absence of all lack—a condition which we never attain in its purity. Cf. Van Riel (2000) 162–163.

- the sight of the evening star (ἐσπέρου θέα, § 206)
- a view of a fine pasture (λειμώνος καλοῦ πρόσοψις, § 206)
- seeing a light of well proportioned intensity (συμμέτρου φωτὸς θέα, § 208)
- pleasure that goes with contemplation and with grasping an intelligible thing (ἐπὶ θεωρίᾳ καὶ τινος καταλήψει νοητοῦ, § 208)
- pleasure caused by health, in which reason also shares (ἐπὶ ὑγιείᾳ, ἐφ' ἧ καὶ ὁ λόγος συγχαίρει, § 208)
- pleasure in a movement from the soul to the body (ἐπὶ κινήσει τῇ ἀπὸ ψυχῆς μὲν ἀρξαμένη, καταβάσει δὲ μέχρι τοῦ σώματος, § 208)
- pleasure in learning (ἐν μαθήμασιν, § 211)

This is a peculiar list, which—and it is worth stressing that—is almost identical with the list provided by Plato himself. For Plato, pure pleasure is confined to the experience of beautiful colours, sounds, smells and forms, and pleasure in learning (ἐν μαθήμασιν).<sup>19</sup> There is, however, an important difference compared to the original Platonic list. It is striking that, although Damascius explicitly states that pure pleasures can be psychic as well as corporeal, the pure pleasures all imply an intellectual element. This is obvious for the pleasure in contemplation itself, and the pleasure in learning. But also the θέα or πρόσοψις of the first three examples implies a mental activity. The pleasure it yields is dependent, not on the perception alone, but on the recognition of the beauty of the situation. The pleasure caused by health is of the same kind: in Plato, the state of health would just be seen as a neutral state, without any pain, but also without any pleasure. The pleasure Damascius reads in it is a pleasure of reflection (and the λόγος is explicitly mentioned): the pleasure of the recognition that I am healthy, and that it could have been otherwise. The pleasure in the movement from the soul to the body, finally, can be explained on the basis of § 155–156, where Damascius gives an example of the movement of this type: ‘when opinion remembers something in the sphere of sense-perception and the result is a disturbance of the body through the medium of imagination, blushing, for instance, when there is shame in the soul, and paleness, when there is fear’ (156.5–9). Of course, these are not examples of pleasures, as they are axed on a disturbance. But it should not be too difficult to find examples of

<sup>19</sup> Plat. *Phileb.* 51b–52a. Plato later adds the pleasure that accompanies virtue to those pleasures that are allowed in the mixed life, without, however, terming this pleasure in virtue a ‘pure’ pleasure: *Phileb.* 63e.

pleasures in this line: excitement in the expectation of the arrival of a friend, for instance, instigated by the soul, and causing a bodily state of nervous impatience. Again, this pleasure is due to mental activity.

There is yet another striking feature involved in this enumeration of pure pleasures. Of course it is not striking that in his commentary, Damascius takes up the examples listed by Plato himself. It is strange, though, that Damascius does this in the context of a theory of pleasure that is primarily Aristotelian, rather than Platonic. If pleasure is defined as the state that flourishes on the perfect performance of an activity, one would expect every pleasure to be a pure one: once the scheme of lack and repletion, pleasure and pain is left out, as it is in the Aristotelian theory, the contrast between pleasure without any pain and pleasures that are mixed with pain, does not make sense any longer. Moreover, the Aristotelian pleasure is yielded by the perfection of the activity in itself. The act of seeing is pleasurable, if it is performed without any impediment, and of course, if the things seen are nice to be seen. So the object to which the activity is directed plays a certain role. In Damascius, one can infer that the same criterion is applicable. But, on the other hand, the qualification of 'purity' of a pleasure requires something extra. Seeing something nice would be pleasurable, but seeing the evening star yields a pure pleasure. Seeing a landscape would be a pleasant experience, whereas seeing a beautiful pasture involves a pure pleasure. Where does that difference come from? Why is pure pleasure called pure? I think the answer lies in a subtle, but highly important distinction. The objects that yield a pure pleasure are of a very specific kind: the pasture is said to be beautiful—a qualification that also applies to the evening star, which in the *Suda* is said to be κάλλιστος ἀστήρ ἐν οὐρανῷ (*Suid.* 1.73). The light is well proportionate (σύμμετρον), and the intelligible things, and learning, imply truth. Thus seen, pure pleasure is the effect of the presence of three characteristics: beauty, proportion, and truth. Could it be a coincidence that these are exactly the representatives of the Good in the *Philebus*? Plato introduced those characteristics as the adequate criteria to judge whether a mixture is good—the good itself being unattainable:

If we cannot use just one category to catch the good, let us take this trio, beauty, proportion, truth, and treating them as a single unit say that this is the element in the mixture that we should most correctly hold responsible, that it is because of this as being good that such a mixture becomes good.

(Plat. *Phileb.* 65a1–5)

Damascius apparently used these three criteria to identify the nature of pure pleasure. For indeed, in § 234, he recapitulates the analysis of the ingredients of the good life by saying:

The pleasures and the kinds of knowledge that he admitted were beautiful and true and proportional, that is to say, they were *pure* and generally fit to coexist.  
(Dam. *In Phileb.* § 234.2–3)

The shift of emphasis that reveals itself here is that the pure pleasures are linked to an activity, as Aristotle would want them to be, but to an activity of a certain kind: the activity of contemplating objects that bear in themselves the trace of the Good, in the form of beauty, truth and proportion. The activity, then, is not so much perfected in and by itself, but rather by the presence of something that reveals itself to the contemplator. If this is correct, this would explain why the Aristotelian εὐδαιμονία is absent. First, εὐδαιμονία is achieved by perfect contemplation, but Aristotle sees the life of contemplation as perfect in itself, whereas in Damascius, the perfection is added to it from a higher order. To go briefly, Aristotle would call contemplation itself the most divine, whereas to the Neoplatonists in general, it gets its divine status from the order of the Good beyond it. Secondly, and maybe more importantly, εὐδαιμονία in the Aristotelian sense implies a practical side, the practical virtues. In Damascius' view, this would not be part of the contemplative life, where the virtues are uplifted to being contemplative themselves, whereas the practical virtues would belong to the social/civic life. Maybe this is exactly what made the term εὐδαιμονία unfit for the description of the happy life: the good life is not a life of πράξις, but only of contemplation.

After all, the Neoplatonists' doctrine is not only a *dimidius Plato*, in the sense that they are not so much interested in the ethical and political side of Plato's doctrines, but they also represent a *dimidius Aristoteles*, in that, where they take over Aristotelian doctrines, and especially so in the context of ethics, they leave out the element of πράξις that is predominant in the Aristotelian analyses.

Thus, despite the enormous influence of Aristotle on Damascius' doctrine of pleasure and the contemplative life, the final result is not an Aristotelian theory. Damascius displays an unmistakeable predilection for the occurrence of pleasure as the result of the sudden, and maybe even unintended presence of something that perfects the activity from the outside: the Good, unattainable in itself, but revealing itself through the attraction of beauty, truth and proportion. So, however intellectualistic Damascius' position may be, the intellect always is superseded by this element of an ungraspable presence of the Good, laying the criterion of true happiness outside the agent's own activity. It is a truly contemplative happiness that depends on the transcendent nature of the Good.

PART THREE

THE CHRISTIAN RECEPTION





LEAH AND RACHEL AS FIGURES  
OF THE ACTIVE AND THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE  
IN AUGUSTINE'S *CONTRA FAUSTUM MANICHAEUM*

Giovanni Catapano

I. *The Figurative Exegesis of Jacob's Two Wives in  
the Context of Book 22 of Contra Faustum Manichaeum*

It was Augustine's brothers<sup>1</sup> who besought him to reply in writing to a work by Faustus of Milevis, a Manichaean Bishop in Roman Africa deemed the most brilliant defender of his faith, and whom Augustine, during his adherence to Manichaeism, had long sought and finally managed to meet.<sup>2</sup> Faustus' work, in turn, was conceived as a response to the objections by the *semichristiani*, as the Manichean bishop viewed Catholics. Whereas Faustus' *Chapters* ('Capitula') are believed to have been written between 386 and 390 (his estimated date of death), the most recent dating estimates place the thirty-three books constituting the *Contra Faustum* between 400–402 or even 401–403.<sup>3</sup>

The main object of discussion is the attitude toward Scripture: Faustus rejected the Old Testament and refuted parts of the New Testament by claiming that they are interpolated, to which the bishop of Hippo responded with a defence of both Testaments in their entirety and with a reading of the first as a mystical and prophetic foreshadowing of the second. If compared to Augustine's earlier anti-Manichaean writings—with the exception of *Contra Adimantum*—and their focus on rationally refuting the Manichean world, the argument underlying *Contra Faustum*, centred as it was on the defence of Scripture and Incarnation, at first glance may appear to the modern reader less charged with philosophical and theoretical values. Yet these are not lacking in this *magnum opus*, as it is called in the *Retractationes* (2.7.1). There is indeed evidence for this in the ethical reflections set forth

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<sup>1</sup> According to his own account in *C. Faustum* 1.1.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Conf.* 5.3.3, 6.10–7.13.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hombert (2000) 25–29.

in the extensive book 22 against the charge of immorality, levelled against the lives of the patriarchs as recounted in the Old Testament. One of the reasons why Faustus and his fellow believers did not accept the first section of the Christian Bible lay in the deeds of great figures of Jewish history reported in these books, and believed to be immoral and scandalous. 'Either your writers forged these things', wrote Faustus in his summing up, 'or the fathers are really guilty. Choose which you please; the crime in either case is detestable, for vicious conduct and falsehood are equally hateful' (22.5).

Augustine replies by defining sin. In his view, only once the boundaries of sin are clearly drawn, can one rightfully judge the deeds of Israel's 'saints' that have raised doubts even among many Christians, as well as try to understand why, if indeed they were sinful, they have been recounted in the sacred texts. Hence, sin is 'any transgression in deed, or word, or desire, of the eternal law' (22.27). The eternal law is, then, 'the divine reason ('ratio') or the will of God, which requires the preservation of natural order, and forbids the breach of it' (22.27). In the natural order of man the soul is superior to the body, and in the soul itself the reason is superior to the other parts bereft of reason; and in reason itself, which is part contemplation and part action, the former is superior to the latter.<sup>4</sup> Contemplation is exercised through faith in this earthly life, as it will hereafter be through sight ('species') in the afterlife (cue 2 *Cor.* 5.7). In this earthly life, then, the natural order of action bids us to act in obedience to faith, therefore restraining all mortal affections and keeping them within their natural limit, putting the higher things before the lower in an orderly love ('ordinata dilectione').

If there was no pleasure in what is unlawful, no one would sin. To sin is to indulge this pleasure instead of restraining it. And by unlawful is meant what is forbidden by the law in which the order of nature is preserved. (22.28)

*Mortales delectationes*, or this life's bodily pleasures, are not unlawful in themselves, but rather when they go beyond the extent necessary to regain or secure the invigoration 'of the individual or of the species' (22.29).

On the strength of these theoretical premises, Augustine defends the behaviour of the Biblical characters, from Abraham to Hosea. Yet when he

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 22.27, ed. Zycha in *CSEL* XXV: 'Proinde sicut anima corpori, ita ipsius animae ratio ceteris eius partibus, quas habent et bestiae, naturae lege praepositur; inque ipsa ratione, quae partim contemplativa est, partim activa, procul dubio contemplatio praecellit. In hac enim et imago dei est, qua per fidem ad speciem reformamur. Actio itaque rationalis contemplationi rationali debet oboedire sive per fidem operanti, sicuti est, quamdiu peregrinamur a domino, sive per speciem, quod erit, cum similes ei erimus, quoniam videbimus eum, sicuti est'.

truly finds their deeds regrettable, he is quick to point to their prophetic sense.<sup>5</sup> As an example thereof, the section dedicated to the wars waged by Moses (22.74–78) is especially noteworthy. But the section that attracts our attention here is yet another: the one concerning Jacob's polygamy (22.47–58). The narrative on this aspect in *Genesis* (30.1–16) had been portrayed by Faustus in deeply offensive and critical terms:

The narrative is not ours [...] which tells how Jacob, husband of four wives—two full sisters, Rachel and Leah, and their handmaids—led the life of a goat among them, so that there was a daily strife among his women who should be the first to lay hold of him when he came from the field, ending sometimes in their hiring him from one another for the night. (22.5)

First of all, Augustine upholds the literal sense of the biblical narrative (chapters 47–50). It may be vindicated, given that Jacob's polygamy does not jeopardise the patriarch's godliness. Indeed, such a deed was no sin, as it was neither contrary to nature ('naturam'), nor morals ('mores'), nor regulations ('praecepta'). It did not go against nature because Jacob would lie with his wives for the sole purpose of procreation; it did not go against morals because at that time and in those lands polygamy was a widely practiced and accepted custom; it did not go against regulations because no law forbade it. Today, Augustine writes, polygamy is an offence ('crimen') because law and custom have changed; it would be a mistake, however, to believe that it is contrary to nature, and therefore is wrong in any place and time. The Manichees are wont to think so because they cannot conceive bridal love unless subordinate to lust and the pursuit of sexual pleasure, and therefore cannot contemplate that one may be endowed with such continence that sexual activity be wholly devoted to begetting children. Indeed, as we read in *Genesis*, this seems to be Leah and Rachel's mindset both when they grant their handmaids to their husband, and when they agree (only once though!) that one should enjoy the night of lovemaking to which the other was entitled. In this extraordinary instance Jacob's continence shone through, as he bowed to his wives' arrangement, waiving his right to lie with the

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine sets forth the general benchmark for distinguishing the figurative from the literal in the first part of Book 3 of *De doctrina christiana* (written in ca. 397): it centres on putting down as figurative all that, if construed in a literal sense, runs against morality and faith. At odds with morality is truly all that is driven by lust ('cupiditas'), being that affection of the mind, contrary to charity, which aims at enjoying one's self, one's neighbour, and other corporeal things without paying heed to God and not for God's sake (cf. *De doct. chr.* 3.10.14–16). The instance of deeds today regarded as sinful and wicked is extensively reviewed in *De doct. chr.* 3.12.18–23.33.

comelier and more beloved of the two, all for the sake of his offspring—likewise the main concern of the two women. Faustus, Augustine concludes, was a clever man and would have easily noticed this, had he not been swayed by the argumentative and partisan spirit, and had he not berated, as a Manichean, the begetting of children.

Having been fully vindicated with regard to its literal sense, the tale of Jacob's polygamy would not in itself require a figurative exegesis.<sup>6</sup> Yet Augustine is unwilling to forgo the opportunity to elaborate on the spiritual sense, in a bid to understand what the four wives of Jacob, two free women and two handmaids, might envisage.<sup>7</sup> In this endeavour he seems driven by the example of Paul, who in *Galatians* 4.22–31 had figuratively portrayed Hagar and Sarah, respectively the handmaid and the free woman who had lain with Abraham. The exegesis submitted by Augustine in chaps. 51–58 is thus apparently untethered by the apologetic concerns of the previous chapters, and leads forth to one of the deeper and broader discussions on the relationship between active and contemplative life that we are given to find throughout his many works.

## II. *Analysis of Chapters 51–58 of C. Faust. 22*

According to the *Epistle to the Galatians*, Hagar and Sarah represent two covenants. The former embodies the Sinai covenant—that of 'the earthly Jerusalem'—and like her sons is a slave (unto the Law). The latter embodies the second covenant—that of the 'heavenly Jerusalem'—and instead is free; her children only shall inherit the promise made to Abraham. In Augustine's view, this exegetical device cannot be applied to Jacob's case, because the children he begat with slave women are granted the land object of the covenant inasmuch as his children born of free women. By contrast, Ishmael, son of Abraham and the handmaid Hagar, is disinherited. Augustine accepts that Jacob's free wives may refer to the new covenant, but deems it not without significance that they are two and not one. As a key to interpreting this duality, he puts forward the distinction between 'two lives in the

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<sup>6</sup> As Tim Whitmarsh rightly noted, however, while Augustine did seek to uphold the literal meaning of the biblical account, he merely presents an allegorical rendering of Jacob's lustful yearning for Rachel.

<sup>7</sup> The figurative sense is in fact not incompatible with the literal sense, according to a hermeneutical principle established since *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (388–389): cf. Dulaey (2004) 40–50.

body of Christ', i.e. between two kinds of life within the Church, which he believes arises elsewhere in the Scriptures<sup>8</sup> and is revealed in the Passion and Resurrection of Christ: 'a worldly one, wherein we toil; and a heavenly one, wherein we shall behold God's delight ("delectationem dei")'. This interpretation is also supported by the two women's names: Leah, meaning 'she who is weary', and Rachel, meaning 'the First Principle made visible' or 'the Word which makes the First Principle visible',<sup>9</sup> whereby *principium* and *verbum* stand for God and the holy Word, in compliance with one of Augustine's best known exegetical views.<sup>10</sup>

This hermeneutical hypothesis is tested in relation to different moments and episodes of the *Genesis* narrative, starting from the two sisters' outward appearance. To Augustine, Leah's feeble eyes bespeak the uncertainty that dwells in men whose actions are guided by faith, and who do not know what benefit these will yield for those they seek to provide for. Leah's eyes therefore conjure up the condition described in *Sap.* 9.14, that *the thoughts of mortal men are fearful, and our counsels uncertain*. Rachel's comely face and good looks, on the contrary, represent the hope of the eternal contemplation of God—a hope 'that is accompanied with a sure ('certam') and delightful understanding of truth'.<sup>11</sup>

In this kind of reading, Jacob serving Laban for Rachel's sake means that those who turn to serve righteousness under the grace of God, by which their sins are forgiven ('Laban' means 'whitening', hence purification), do so because driven by the yearning to dwell one day in the Word, through which they may behold God.<sup>12</sup> For this reason they heed and practice the commandments concerning neighbourly love (the fourth to tenth in the Decalogue, representing Jacob's first seven years of work under Laban), as much as those relating to Beatitudes (the other seven years).<sup>13</sup> For Rachel to be his wife, Jacob must also accept to lie with her older sister Leah first. In this earthly life, in fact, one cannot attain the bliss of perfect wisdom,

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine may be thinking of the twains of Martha-Mary and Peter-John: see § III below.

<sup>9</sup> We do not know for sure whence Augustine, unskilled in Hebrew, gleaned these meanings. In *De doctrina christiana* he clearly refers to Hebrew language experts (whom he does not name), who translated all the forenames in Scripture (cf. *De doctr. chr.* 2.16.23, 39.59). Simonetti (1994) 445–446 and 471 argues that Augustine draws from the *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum* by Jerome, albeit not exclusively.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. *De Gen.* 1.2.3; *Conf.* 11.8.10–9.11.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 29.17 and *C. Faust.* 22.52, pp. 645.21–646.2.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 29.18 and *C. Faust.* 22.52, p. 646.2–9.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 29.20, 27, 30 and *C. Faust.* 22.52, pp. 646.19–647.9.

without having first undergone toil in action and suffering, which comes before vision. All this corresponds to the joint teaching of *Sir.* 1.26(33) and *Is.* 7.9: whoever yearns for wisdom must first abide by the commandments, and 'unless ye believe ye shall not understand'. The commandments pertain to righteousness, which guides those who live by faith,<sup>14</sup> and faith wavers amid earthly trials and temptations; by piously believing what is not yet understood, moreover, one becomes worthy of gaining understanding ('intellegentia'), which comes by wisdom. We should therefore not berate the *studium* of those who burn with love for truth in its purest form but regulate it, so that beginning with faith it may strive to reach its goal through good works.<sup>15</sup> During this life ('in hoc saeculo') the goal of a *speciosa intellegentia* is not wholly unattainable, though it is destined to remain united to a *laboriosa iustitia*, since the mortal body still weighs down on the mind, as stated in *Sap.* 9.15, even when down here it may behold the unchangeable Good 'in a clear and true form'.<sup>16</sup>

The theme of Leah's fertility set against Rachel's barrenness is interpreted with regard to the relationship between preaching and teaching. Leah is loved for her children, in the sense that the greatest fruit of toil of the righteous is their spiritual children, whom they beget for the kingdom of God through the preaching of the Gospel.<sup>17</sup> These spiritual children are born more easily and plentifully from the announcement of Christ crucified (cf. *1 Cor.* 1.23) and that which speaks of His human nature; such things are perceived more swiftly by the human mind than truths concerning the divinity of Christ, and do not hurt Leah's 'feeble eyes'. Rachel, however, is barren at first because the eternal generation of the Word, the object of the contemplation of wisdom, is far more difficult to explain, as Isaiah also says (53.8). The contemplative life also seeks to be unburdened by any occupation in order to perceive the invisible and ineffable manifestation of God's power through His creatures (cf. *Rom.* 1.20).<sup>18</sup> Yet it strives to teach what it has known, insofar as possible, and to that end it resorts to bodily images and corporeal likenesses. While these may be unfit to express incorporeal realities such as the divine, they do allow for mental representations thereof, by virtue of an action that Augustine designates with the word *cogitare*.<sup>19</sup> This is

<sup>14</sup> As for the famous verse in *Hab.* 2.4 quoted in *Rom.* 1.17; *Gal.* 3.11; *Hbr.* 10.38.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 29.23–27 and *C. Faust.* 22.52–53, pp. 647.9–648.13.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 29.28 and *C. Faust.* 22.53, p. 648.13–19.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 29.31–35 and *C. Faust.* 22.53, p. 648.23–28.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 29.31 and *C. Faust.* 22.54, p. 649.3–13.

<sup>19</sup> For the specific meaning of the word *cogitatio* in Augustine, cf. Watson (1994). In book 11

suggested by Rachel's choice to have her husband's children by her handmaid Bilhah. Her name means 'old' in the sense that the images are conceived from the bodily life of the 'old man',<sup>20</sup> dedicated to the pleasures of the flesh, even when giving heed to the spiritual and unchangeable.<sup>21</sup> Rachel finally gives birth, though with great hardship, for it seldom happens that the truth uttered at the beginning of the Gospel of John (the eternal divinity of the Word) is understood without the *phantasma* of 'fleshly' thoughts.<sup>22</sup> Leah, in turn, grants Jacob her handmaid Zilpah, 'mouth going about', who represents those that preach the Gospel only with their lips but not with their heart, as if to signify that apostolic life also welcomes any spiritual offspring even when begotten by hypocritical preachers (cf. *Phil.* 1.18).<sup>23</sup>

Augustine pays especial attention to the mandrake instance. He does not accept the opinion of some unspecified scholars, according to whom Rachel had asked Leah for some of the mandrakes gathered by Ruben, trusting in the alleged power of the fruit that is said to make barren women fertile. Indeed, Rachel did not conceive that night, but after Leah had given birth several other times. Having personally experienced the qualities of the fruit,

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of *De trinitate*, subsequent to *Contra Faustum*, *cogitatio* is defined as the union of the image produced from memory, of internal vision, and of the will. The image produced from memory is the likeness ('similitudo') of the form ('species') of a body as perceived with the senses; a likeness that is retained in the memory even when the body is withdrawn. When recollecting, the soul is urged by *voluntas* to turn itself to the images stored in memory, and these copy in its glance ('acies') a temporary form, which is the *interna visio*; thus remembrance is formed. Hence, *cogitatio* arises from sense-perception (cf. *De trin.* 11.3.6). In book 10 of *Confessiones*, written before *Contra Faustum*, *cogitare* is described as the act of gathering up the things we have learnt in the liberal disciplines, and laying them up for ready reference in the mind. These things did not enter our memory through the senses, for they are not sensible (cf. *Conf.* 10.10.17–11.18). To the extent that the verb *cogitare* enjoins thinking with perception through the senses, its use in *Contra Faustum*, therefore, breaks away from the concept expressed in *Confessiones* and foreshadows the considerations in *De trinitate*.

<sup>20</sup> A theme dealt with in the writings of the apostle Paul, of course: cf. *Rom.* 6.6; *Eph.* 4.22–24; *Col.* 3.9–10.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 30.1–3 and *C. Faust.* 22.54, pp. 649.16–650, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 30.22 and *C. Faust.* 22.58, p. 654.20–26. In *De musica* (389) Augustine defines *phantasmata* as "images of images", and more precisely as the result of several *phantasiai*. A *phantasia*, in turn, is defined as that which the memory contains from the motions of the mind brought to bear on the passions of the body. For instance, supposing I have met and known my father but not my grandfather; when I think about the former there is a *phantasia*, and when I think about the latter there is a *phantasma* (cf. *De mus.* 6.11.32). Cf. also *De trin.* 8.6.9, 9.6.10 as well as, for any possible sources, Catapano (2006) 1650, n. 36. It follows that the *phantasma* is bound, through the *phantasia*, to the sense-perception of bodies; thus it constitutes a hindrance to the knowledge of God, as Augustine oftentimes repeats in his writings.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 30.9–13 and *C. Faust.* 22.55.

pleasing to the eye and sweet-smelling but tasteless, Augustine believes that the only plausible reason why Rachel could have longed for the fruit was its rarity and the pleasantness of its smell. His interpretation is therefore not the one suggested by the science of the hidden virtues of plants, but by common sense, namely that mandrakes stand for good character and specifically popular reputation, which must be sought not for its own sake but so as to provide more fittingly for one's fellow men (cf. *1 Tim.* 3.7).<sup>24</sup> To obtain it, those men of contemplation who are fit to lead must accept, albeit grudgingly and since compelled thereto, positions of responsibility in public business to the benefit of all and for the sake of contemplative life itself, which derives honour from having provided the people with good leaders. This is the figurative sense of Jacob's behaviour when he resigns to spending the night with Leah rather than Rachel, who had waived her rights in exchange for the mandrakes.<sup>25</sup>

Extrapolated from its exegetical context, the doctrine of contemplative life and its relationship with active life set out in Chapters 52–58 of *Contra Faustum*, Book 22 can therefore be summarized in the following points:

- i. contemplative life is the desire ('studium') of contemplation ('contemplatio'), and contemplation is the understanding ('intellegentia') of divine truth, the Word through which God is known;
- ii. given that this contemplation, wherein wisdom ('sapientia') abides, is fully achieved in heavenly life, the longing for it in this life presents itself as hope ('spes') in a foretaste of the eschatological future that is not yet fully owned;
- iii. the object of contemplation is something invisible, incorporeal and unchangeable, inaccessible *per se* to the senses and unutterable; it nonetheless can be perceived through creatures (according to *Romans* 1.20) and to some extent conveyed through the use of metaphors of the body, so that it may be conceived in thought ('cogitatio') though not grasped in understanding (the latter being very rare in this life);
- iv. contemplation alone is desirable in itself; on the other hand, action ('actio') is endured in anticipation and for the sake of contemplation;
- v. active life is grounded in toil ('labor') and bound up with adherence to righteousness in dealing with others, the practice of the Beatitudes, the apostolate and the different forms of ecclesial service and commitment ('negotium');

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 30.14 and *C. Faust.* 22.56.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Gn.* 30.15–16 and *C. Faust.* 22.57–58, p. 651.4–654.20.



- vi. action is to contemplation as righteousness is to wisdom and as faith ('fides') is to understanding; in this life, in which the soul is bound to a tainted body, the first term precedes the second and continues to exist even when the second is fulfilled inasmuch as possible;
- vii. contemplative men tend to be unburdened by commitments and live the quiet life of the student; but if they are able to lead, they must accept positions of government and responsibility within the Church for the common good and so that contemplative life itself may derive honour from this.

Augustine himself shall summarize this doctrine in a work written shortly after *Contra Faustum*, speaking of the soul's two *virtutes*:

Moreover, there are two virtues (or talents) which have been laid before the mind of man. Of these, the one is the active, and the other the contemplative: the one being that whereby the way is taken, and the other that whereby the goal is reached; the one that by which men labour in order that the heart may be cleansed to see God, and the other that by which men are disengaged and God is seen. Thus the former of these two virtues is occupied with the precepts for the right exercise of the temporal life, whereas the latter deals with the doctrine of that life which is everlasting. In this way, the one operates and the other rests; for the former finds its sphere in the purging of sins, the latter moves in the light of the purged. And thus, moreover, in this mortal life the one is engaged with the work of a good conversation; the other subsists rather on faith, and is seen only in the person of the very few, and through the glass darkly (1 Cor. 13.12), and only in part in a kind of vision of the unchangeable truth. Now these two virtues are understood to be presented emblematically in the instance of the two wives of Jacob. Of these I have discoursed already up to the measure of my ability, and as fully as seemed to be appropriate to my task, (in what I have written) in opposition to Faustus the Manichaeon. For Leah, indeed, by interpretation means 'labouring', whereas Rachel signifies 'the First Principle seen'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *De consensu evangelistarum* 1.5.8: 'Proinde cum duae virtutes propositae sint animae humanae, una activa, altera contemplativa, illa qua itur, ista quo pervenitur, illa qua laboratur, ut cor mundetur ad videndum deum, ista qua vacatur et videtur deus: illa est in praeceptis exercendae vitae huius temporalis, ista in doctrina vitae illius sempiternae. Ac per hoc illa operatur, ista requiescit, quia illa est in purgatione peccatorum, ista in lumine purgatorum. Ac per hoc in hac vita mortali illa est in opere bonae conversationis, ista vero magis in fide et aput perpaucos per speculum in aenigmate et ex parte in aliqua visione incommutabilis veritatis. Hae duae virtutes in duabus uxoribus Iacob figuratae intelleguntur. De quibus adversus Faustum Manichaeum pro modulo meo, quantum illi operi sufficere videbatur, disserui. Lia quippe interpretatur "laborans", Rachel autem "visum principium". The work dates back to the years 403–404.

### III. *Originality of the Interpretation Elaborated in Contra Faustum*

Aside from *Contra Faustum* and its mentioning in *De consensu evangelistarum*, Augustine says very little about Leah and Rachel, and never in terms of the relationship between active life/virtues and contemplative life/virtues.<sup>27</sup> When portrayed allegorically, the two women represent the Church, who is the birthright mother of all Believers, notwithstanding their baptism and evangelization by 'fleshly' men ('carnalibus'),<sup>28</sup> or the coming together of Jews and Gentiles within the Church.<sup>29</sup> The exegesis expounded in *Contra Faustum* will thrive indeed: as Cuthbert Butler noted in a classic study of Western mysticism, in the West it was Augustine who set the trend of Leah as an allegory of active life and of Rachel as an allegory of contemplative life. A tradition that Gregory the Great will take over and hand down to the Latin Middle Ages.<sup>30</sup>

Prior to Augustine, it seems that the allegorical interpretation of Jacob's two wives was different. Philo of Alexandria believes Leah to stand for virtue,<sup>31</sup> and more precisely the virtue of the rational part (λογικόν) of the soul,<sup>32</sup> and Rachel, when not construed as a negative figure of outward sensation,<sup>33</sup> to represent at best the virtues of the irrational (ἄλογον) part.<sup>34</sup> Unlike Augustine, Philo sees Leah as symbolizing something higher than what Rachel symbolizes. With the Christian exegetes the hierarchy of values is inverted<sup>35</sup> and placed in connection with the two covenants. Among the Latin authors, Cyprian of Carthage for example interprets Leah as a type of the Synagogue, and Rachel as a type of the Church;<sup>36</sup> so does Ambrose<sup>37</sup> who prefers to describe the Synagogue-Church juxtaposition in Pauline terms of the law-grace.<sup>38</sup> Yet this kind of interpretation is what Augustine seems

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Cameron (1999).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *De baptismo* 1.16.25; *Sermo ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem* 5.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Sermo* 137.6.6.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Butler (1967) 155–223.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Phil. Alex. *De post. Caini* 135; *De migr. Abr.* 145.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Phil. Alex. *De congr.* 26.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Phil. Alex. *Leg. alleg.* 2.46; *De somn.* 2.16.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *De congr.* 26 and Alexandre (1967) 122–124, n. 2–4, as well as the entries on Leah and Rachel in the Index of biblical characters in Radice (1994) 1272 and 1278.

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Francesca Calabi for assisting me in better grasping the differences between the Hebrew and Christian exegesis of Jacob's two wives.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Cyprian. *Ad Quirinum* 1.20.

<sup>37</sup> Inheritor of a typology already found in Justin's *Dialogue with the Jew Triphon*, as noted by R. Palla in vol. 3 of the Latin-Italian edition of Ambrose's *Opera omnia* (1982) 295 n. 85.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Ambros. *De Iacob et vita beata* 2.5.25; *Expositio psalmi cxviii* litt. 19.24.

to reject in *Contra Faustum*, when he declares without hesitation that not only Rachel, but Leah too refers to the new covenant. Augustine therefore appears to have inherited the Christian exegesis of Laban's two daughters only insofar as he regards Rachel as a symbol of something more perfect and preferable.

If the allegorical interpretation laid out in *Contra Faustum* features a more marked originality than the previous exegetical tradition,<sup>39</sup> it is indeed perfectly consistent with Augustine's interpretation of two other biblical couples: Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha on the one hand, and the apostles Peter and John on the other.<sup>40</sup> Martha and Peter are seen as figures of action, while Mary and John are considered figures of contemplation. It is in this key that Augustine construes what Jesus says in *Luke* 10.42 ('Mary has chosen the best part') and his preference for John, 'the disciple whom he loved': to him they both signify that contemplation is preferable to action. Still, the latter is not condemned, but regarded as the necessary condition for the believer in this life; his rightful and inevitable toil, given that resting in the sight of God is reserved for future life. Martha's industriousness—deemed lesser than Mary's listening to the Word, just as manifoldness is beneath unity, and provisional because it is linked to needs that will disappear with the glorification of mortal bodies—can thus be justified when subordinated to quiet contemplation.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, a life marked by toil as a result of action, as represented by Peter, is not incompatible with a life characterized by the blissfulness of utter and unimpeded contemplation, as portrayed by John, for the reason that the latter is the otherworldly reward for the former; they belong to two different conditions of existence: the historical, peculiar to earthly pilgrimage, and the eschatological, specific to its heavenly abode.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> One should however examine in depth the views of exegetes such as Origen and Jerome. Carlos Steel kindly informed me that even Maximus the Confessor construes Leah and Rachel in terms of active life/contemplative life, and this may mean that the roots of such an exegesis lie in the Alexandrian tradition.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Torchia (1999); the recent study by Cipriani (2007) is to be added to the bibliography listed there.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Sermones* 103–104; 169.14.17; 179.3–6; 255.2.2; 6.6; *De trin.* 1.10.20; *Quaestiones evangeliorum* 2.20; *De Genesi ad litteram* 4.14.25.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *In Ioannis evangelium tractatus* 124.5–7. Let us compare the following passage with the abovementioned one drawn from the *De consensu evangelistarum*: 'Duas itaque vitas sibi divinitus praedicatas et commendatas novit ecclesia, quarum est una in fide, altera in specie; una in tempore peregrinationis, altera in aeternitate mansionis; una in labore, altera in requie; una in via, altera in patria; una in opere actionis, altera in mercede

A frame of thought that may overlap what we have identified above as point (vii) of the *Contra Faustum* doctrine is ultimately found in the non-exegetical expositions of the relationship between contemplative *otium* and active *negotium* in Augustine's works after his ordination as bishop of Hippo, from the *epistula* 48 up to the famous book 19 of *De civitate Dei*.<sup>43</sup> Especially noteworthy is the issue of the relationship between monastic life, which through a genuinely philosophical quest for truth aims to prefigure the contemplation to come, and the episcopate, which is seen rather as a burden than an honour.

If no one imposes this burden upon us, we are free to sift and contemplate truth ('percipiendae atque intuendae veritati vacandum est'); but if it be laid upon us, we are necessitated for love's sake to undertake it. And yet not even in this case are we obliged wholly to relinquish the sweets of contemplation; for were these to be withdrawn, the burden might prove more than we could bear. (De civ. Dei 19.19)

The wording of the *De civitate Dei* is particularly interesting because it expressly sets forth a comparison with ancient philosophy. In his *De philosophia* Varro classified philosophical schools also on the basis of the distinction between a life that may be *otiosa*, *negotiosa*, and mixed, going on to express his preference for the third kind, in agreement with the views of 'old-school' Academics as conveyed by Antiochus of Ascalon (cf. *De civ. Dei* 19.1–3).<sup>44</sup> Augustine argues that, from a Christian standpoint, all three kinds are feasible and lead to everlasting rewards, providing one keeps the faith and practices the twofold love for God and neighbour.

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contemplationis; una declinat a malo et facit bonum, altera nullum habet a quo declinet malum, et magnum habet quo fruatur bonum; una cum hoste pugnat, altera sine hoste regnat; una fortis est in adversis, altera nihil sentit adversi; una carnales libidines frenat, altera spiritalibus delectationibus vacat; una est vincendi cura sollicita, altera victoriae pace secunda; una in tentationibus adiuvatur, altera sine ulla tentatione in ipso adiutore laetatur; una subvenit indigenti, altera ibi est ubi nullum invenit indigentem; una aliena peccata ut sua sibi ignoscantur ignoscit, altera nec patitur quod ignoscat, nec facit quod sibi poscat ignosci; una flagellatur malis, ne extollatur in bonis, altera tanta plenitudine gratiae caret omni malo, ut sine ulla tentatione superbiae cohaereat summo bono; una bona et mala discernit, altera quae sola bona sunt cernit; ergo una bona est, sed adhuc misera; altera melior et beata. Ista significata est per apostolum Petrum, illa per Iohannem. Tota hic agitur ista usque in huius saeculi finem, et illic invenit finem; differtur illa complenda post huius saeculi finem, sed in futuro saeculo non habet finem' (*In Io. ev. tr.* 124.5).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Trout (1999).

<sup>44</sup> For insight into Antiochus' position on contemplative life, cf. Bénatouïl (2009).

No man has a right to lead such a life of contemplation ('otiosus') as to forget in his own ease ('otio') the service due to his neighbour; nor has any man a right to be so immersed in active life ('actuosus') as to neglect the contemplation of God.  
(*De civ. Dei* 19.19)

This seems to tone down the clear, almost exclusive preference for philosophical *otium* spelt out in Augustine's early writings and marked by a strong Neo-Platonic streak.<sup>45</sup> Two factors may have weighed upon this change of opinion: the swift realization that a perfect knowledge of God is unattainable in this life,<sup>46</sup> and especially the autobiographical meditation on his own experience. Having retired from the teaching of rhetoric at the age of thirty-one to devote himself to the full-time pursuit of truth in a philosophical-religious community, at the age of thirty-six Augustine was literally forced to enter the priesthood,<sup>47</sup> and was made bishop shortly thereafter. Augustine could therefore write well, commenting on the subject of Jacob's tale that 'What we read is explained by what we meet with in our own experience. Do we not see this happen everywhere? Men coming from secular employments, to seek leisure ('otium') for the study and contemplation of truth, their beloved Rachel, but are intercepted mid-way by ecclesiastical affairs, which require them to be set to work, as if Leah said to them, *You must come in to me!*' (*C. Faust.* 22.58). Still, these words also reveal that acknowledging the usefulness and duty of active engagement never resulted in Augustine's denial of the primacy of contemplation. His friend since the founding of the monastic community of Hippo,<sup>48</sup> Possidius gives a powerful account of this:

He was not intently concerned nor entangled in the property which the Church held and possessed. Yet though following with inmost desire after the greater spiritual things, he sometimes relaxed from his contemplation of eternal things and turned to temporal affairs.

But when such things had been arranged and set in order, then as though freed from consuming and annoying cares, his soul rebounded to the more intimate and lofty thoughts of the mind in which he either pondered on the discovery of divine truth or dictated some of the things already discovered or else emended some of the works which had been previously dictated and then transcribed. This he accomplished by working all day and toiling at night.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. especially *epistula* 10 with the study by Folliet (1962).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Catapano (2001) 39–40.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Sermo* 355.2; Possidius *Vita Augustini* 4.1–2.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Vessey (1999).

He was a type of the Church on high, even as most glorious Mary, of whom it is written that she sat at the feet of the Lord and listened intently to His word; but when her sister who was cumbered about much serving, complained because she received no help, she heard the words: 'Martha, Martha, Mary hath chosen that better part which shall not be taken away from her'.<sup>49</sup>

Like Jacob, then, even Augustine still preferred Rachel despite agreeing to embrace Leah.

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<sup>49</sup> Possidius *Vita Augustini* 24.10–12.

MAXIMUS CONFESSOR ON *THEORY* AND *PRAXIS*  
A COMMENTARY ON *AMBIGUA AD JOHANNEM VI* (10) 1–19

Carlos Steel

Maximus the Confessor (580–662), who wrote a hundred years after the golden age of the commentators in Alexandria, is not an author often read outside patristic circles. Yet this original but difficult thinker deserves not only to be studied in the context of Christian theology but to have his place in the history of philosophy as the last great representative of the Platonic tradition in Late Antiquity.<sup>1</sup> With this contribution I intend to contribute to such a philosophical reappraisal, by focusing on Maximus' views on theoretical or contemplative life and its relation to *praxis*. It should be noticed that Maximus spent most of his life in a contemplative context, in monasteries in Constantinople, in Cyzicus and in North Africa, what did not prevent him from playing an active role in the theological-political debate on orthodoxy. The relation between *praxis* and *theoria* was a topic often discussed in the monastic milieu, as can be seen in the work of Evagrius (345–399), who also deeply influenced Maximus.<sup>2</sup> In this essay I do not offer a comprehensive overview of Maximus' views on *praxis* and *theoria*, drawing on all relevant passages in his different works, but I will examine in detail one particular text, which deals with this subject. In my view further progress in our understanding of Maximus' thought will come from a close reading of some crucial texts rather than from another general exposition of which we have already some fine examples.<sup>3</sup> My argument will be entirely based on an interpretation of *Ambigua ad Johannem VI* (10), a fascinating but also dreadfully dense and complex text, which asks for a close reading and detailed comments. Having noticed

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<sup>1</sup> There is a chapter on Maximus by Sheldon-Williams in Armstrong (1967) 492–505 and he figures again in a separate chapter (by D. Bradshaw) in the recently published *Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*: Gerson (2010) 813–828. Also Gersh (1978) offers an interesting attempt to situate Maximus in the history of late ancient and earlier medieval philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> On Maximus' life and work see the introduction of Louth (1996).

<sup>3</sup> See Balthasar (1961); Völker (1965); Thunberg (1965, 1995<sup>2</sup>); Kapriev (2005) 45–104 (on *praxis* and *theoria*, see 95–98).

the lamentable state of most modern translations I decided to include in my argument long sections in translation based on the new edition in preparation.<sup>4</sup>

I. *Why Does Gregory of Nazianzus  
Not Mention Praxis as a Way to God?*

In his Book of *Ambigua* or *Apories* Maximus offers his views on a series of problems concerning the interpretation of some passages in the works of Gregory of Nazianzus, which were discussed in the learned circles of monasteries. The problems had been assembled in a letter addressed to Maximus by bishop John of Cyzicus. In his reply Maximus goes far beyond the usual format of a solution of problems. The difficulties John raises in his letter offer him an opportunity to develop his own thought in an original way. In the sixth *Ambiguum* Maximus is asked to comment on a difficult passage in Gregory of Nazianzus' *Oratio* 21.2.<sup>5</sup> Gregory composed this oration as an encomium in honour of Athanasius of Alexandria six years after his death in 379. As Gregory himself declares, it was not just his intention to praise a saintly friend. In praising Athanasius he wanted to celebrate the virtues the saint had practiced in his life in an exemplary way.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There are three modern translations of the *Ambigua ad Johannem* VI: E. Ponsoye (*Ambigua. Saint Maxime le Confesseur*, Paris 1994); A. Louth (*Maximus the Confessor*, London 1996; contains only the translation of *Amb.* VI and LXVII); C. Moreschini (*Massimo Il Confessore, Ambigua*, Milano 2003). The French translation contains numerous errors. The English version, the work of an international authority on Maximus, has great literary qualities but is often deformed by serious translation errors. The Italian translation is usually better than the English, but has its own errors. In many cases the medieval Latin translation of John Scot Eriugena (ninth century) in the excellent edition of Jeaneau (1988) is of greater help than any existing modern translation. It must be said, however, that Maximus often writes an extremely complicated Greek. In my own translations I usually started from Louth's translation correcting and rewriting it where needed. I shall not enter a discussion on the translation, justifying my corrections. Although I corrected Louth's version often substantially, I gratefully recognize that I depend on him in my search of an appropriate English vocabulary. For this study I could make use of the new edition of the *Ambigua* in preparation by Carl Laga (Leuven), which is supposed to appear in the *Series Graeca* of the *Corpus Christianorum*. Quotations are from that edition in preparation. I add, however, references to the edition of PG 91. In this part of the text there are not many significant divergences with the PG.

<sup>5</sup> PG 35, 1084c1–8; ed. Mossay, *Sources chrétiennes* (SC) 270, 112–114.

<sup>6</sup> Some hundred years later Marinus will praise in his *Life of Proclus* his master Proclus for having ascended through all levels of virtue.



And again in praising virtues, Gregory intended to praise God himself, who grants all virtues to human beings and brings them back to Himself by his enlightenment.

For God is to intelligible beings what the sun is to the sensible. The latter lightens the visible, God the invisible world. The sun makes our bodily sight sun-like, God makes our intellectual natures God-like. And, as that, which bestows on the things which see and are seen the power of seeing and being seen, is itself the most beautiful of visible things; so God, who creates, for those who think, and that which is thought of, the power of thinking and being thought of, is Himself the highest of the objects of thought, in Whom every desire finds its bourn, beyond Whom it can no further go. For not even the most philosophic, the most piercing, the most curious intellect has, or can ever have, a more exalted object. For this is the utmost of things desirable, and they who arrive at it find there a rest from all speculation (πάσης θεωρίας ἀνάπαυσις).<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious from the very beginning of this encomium that Gregory sets the life of Athanasius in a Platonic context, paraphrasing almost literally the celebrated analogy between the Good and the Sun in *Republic* 6.507b–509a. As is the Good in Plato's understanding, God is for Gregory the ultimate object of all human desire, the most exalted object of our contemplative endeavor. The life of this Christian saint thus fulfills in an ideal way what Plato and other philosophers in his tradition have been aiming at in their philosophy. The 'rest from all speculation' they all hope to reach refers again to a celebrated passage in the *Republic*: 7.532e2–4: ὁδοῦ ἀνάπαυλα ἂν εἴη καὶ τέλος τῆς πορείας, a text already referred to by Plotinus at the end of *Enn.* 6.9 [9] 8.43. It is not, however, this Platonic context that was problematic for John of Cyzicus, but rather what was said in the concluding section:

If it happened to someone, after severing by means of reason and theory (διὰ λόγου καὶ θεωρίας) matter and this fleshly part, whether called cloud or veil, to come together with God and be mixed with the most pure light, so far as is permitted to human nature, this person is blessed for his ascent from here and his deification there, which is granted to those who genuinely philosophize and transcend the material dyad because of the Unity that is conceived in the Trinity.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> PG 35, 1084a13–b26; SC 270, 112. I adapted and corrected the translation of Schaff and Wace (1886–1889).

<sup>8</sup> ὥτινι μὲν οὖν ἐξεγένετο διὰ λόγου καὶ θεωρίας διασχόντι τὴν ὕλην καὶ τὸ σαρκικὸν τοῦτο, εἴτε νέφος ἢ λέγειν εἴτε προκαλυμμα, θεῷ συγγενέσθαι καὶ τῷ ἀκραιφνεστάτῳ φωτὶ κραθῆναι, καθ' ὅσον ἐφικτὸν ἀνθρωπίνῃ φύσει, μακάριος οὗτος τῆς ἐντεῦθεν ἀναβάσεως καὶ τῆς ἐκείσε θεώσεως, ἣν τὸ γνησίως φιλοσοφῆσαι χαρίζεται καὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ τὴν ὕλικὴν δυάδα γενέσθαι διὰ τὴν ἐν τῇ τριάδι νοουμένην ἐνότητα (PG 91, 1105c–d = PG 35, 1084c1–8; SC 270, 112–114).

According to John of Cyzicus this passage had given raise to some controversy among Gregory's interpreters. What is the 'material dyad' and what the 'Unity conceived in the trinity' mentioned in the last sentence? Maximus will offer an explanation of this difficult passage in the second part of *Ambiguum* VI (c. 42–51). In the first part (c. 1–41), however, he deals with another difficulty, which is of utmost importance for the topic of this paper. Some people, John wrote in his letter, thought that Gregory, by insisting on the role of *logos* and *theoria* in the ascent to unity with God had forgotten to mention the essential role of practical philosophy. For that reason they thought that Gregory's text was 'defective' in this respect. For without first setting right practical life by eliminating the passions and acquiring the virtues it is impossible to reach the end of contemplation. Maximus could not agree more, as this is the view he always defended himself. Without practical philosophy and the attainment of *apatheia* the contemplative life would be a sham as all search of knowledge would be deviated in function of the needs of our passions.<sup>9</sup> However, he does not agree with the critique on Gregory, who, as much as himself, always acknowledged the importance of *praxis*.<sup>10</sup> Therefore he proposes a benign interpretation of the disputed passage in Gregory's text, which will lead him to a long exposition of his own views on the relation between theory and praxis.

I myself do not think that the above quoted passage of the Master about the virtue of the saints is defective, although, as you wrote, there are some who think this, because he says that the pursuit of philosophy in accordance with God is 'by means of reason and theory' alone without practical [philosophy].<sup>11</sup>

As he explains, with the phrase 'by means of reason and theory' Gregory does not only refer to theoretical philosophy, but he introduces philosophy in its full comprehensive meaning, which Maximus defines as 'the true judgment and activity about reality, uplifted by action'.<sup>12</sup> I know of no

<sup>9</sup> On the relation between praxis and theory in Maximus see Thunberg (1965) 337 ff. Important texts are *Mystagogia* 5; *QTh.* 18.144–193; 52.63–171; 63.372–479 and *Ambig.* 1368a–1372b.

<sup>10</sup> On Gregory's views on active and contemplative life, see Gautier (2009) 67–88.

<sup>11</sup> Εγὼ μὲν οὐκ οἶμαι ἐλλειπῶς ἔχειν τὸν ἀποδοθέντα περὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς τῶν ἁγίων τοῦ διδασκάλου λόγον, ἅν τινες, ὡς γεγράφατε, τοῦτο νομίζωσιν, διὰ τοῦ λόγῳ καὶ θεωρίᾳ μόνον, πρακτικῆς δὲ ἄνευ, τὴν κατὰ θεὸν τῶν μετελθόντων αὐτὴν φιλοσοφίαν εἶπεῖν (1105d–1108a).

<sup>12</sup> τουναντίον δὲ διηρμένῃ τῇ πράξει τὴν ἀληθῆ περὶ τὰ ὄντα κρίσιν αὐτῶν καὶ ἐνέργειαν, ἣν δὴ φιλοσοφίαν ὄντως πληρεστάτην ἔγωγε τολμήσας μόνῃ ὀρίζομαι (1108a). διηρμένην is difficult to interpret here, not because the term is problematic, as Moreschini (2003) 640 notices: 'la parola non si trova nei lessici'. It is the part. perf. pass. of διαίρω 'to lift up, to arouse'. This participle is often used in rhetorical treatises on style to indicate what is 'sublime'. Eriugena

antecedents of this definition of philosophy, which brings together its theoretical and practical dimension. That a virtuous action depends on right judgment is, of course, a common view in the philosophical tradition.<sup>13</sup> As Maximus observes, in practical life we need reason (*logos*) to order the motions of the body, 'restraining it by right reasoning, as by a bridle, from turning aside towards wickedness', and we also need theoretical insight (*theoria*) 'to resolve to choose prudently what is well thought and judged'. Therefore, 'action is always connected to reason and judgment on action is always contained in theory'. Through 'reason and theory' the soul thus becomes adorned with all 'philosophical virtues' manifesting themselves in various actions.

Maximus does not just mean that we need reasoning and deliberation to decide on the right course of action. He makes a much more radical intellectualistic claim, namely that right action depends on true insight in the nature of things: τὴν ἀληθῆ περὶ τὰ ὄντα κρίσιν. But how could such a metaphysical understanding of what beings are have any impact on the way we live? Maximus' claim can best be understood in a Platonic sense: once one has in *theoria* understood what beings are, and in particular the difference between the sensible things and their true intelligible forms or *logoi*, one will focus on that truth and not let oneself be moved by transitory things, namely 'the flesh and the world':

When someone has piously understood through theory how things are and has determined through rational deliberation by right conjecture the reason concerning them and keeps by himself judgment inflexible or rather himself <inflexible> by judgment, *he has in a comprehensive way all virtue*<sup>14</sup> at once, as he is not anymore moved towards anything else after having known the truth. And he eagerly passes by all things, as he is absolutely not concerned with

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translates: 'e contrario vero compactam actioni veram circa ea quae sunt eorum et iudicationem et operationem' (6.12–14). As Guy Guldentops told me, Eriugena probably read διηρμένην, but misinterpreted it. The term 'compactus' is used by Eriugena in the translation of Dionysius for ἐναρμόνιος or forms of the verb ἐφαρμόττω. In one case, however, Eriugena uses it to translate ἐπηρμένων θρόνων as 'sedium compactarum' (*Hier. Cael.* 28.7) where it has the sense of 'sublime seats'. In his commentary he notices, however, that the meaning may be different: 'Ipsa, inquit, a superioribus enim similiter subauditur, nominatio altissimarum et compactarum vel sublevatarum sedium, ex ambiguo enim greco transfertur epêmenôn, quod, utrum a verbo eparmo, id est compago vel aduno, an a verbo eparo, id est sustollo, derivatur, dubium est' (*Expositiones in Ierarchiam coelestem* 7, ed. Barbet [CCCM 31], p. 98, ll. 256–261; see also R. Roques's note on p. 217).

<sup>13</sup> See for example the Stoic definition quoted *infra* (n. 18) and Alex. Aphr. *De Anima Mantissa* 105.20–25 and 174.10–28.

<sup>14</sup> This phrase is taken from the first sentence of Greg. Naz. *Or.* 21.

those things that are said to belong to the flesh or the world, since he possesses already without any struggle, as an internal disposition, action embraced by reason.<sup>15</sup>

Maximus thus binds together in the strongest way the theoretical understanding as to the nature of things and the right action in relation to them. A person who has understood what true being is and what is only 'flesh', that is the sensible things and the effect they may have on the soul through his passionate interaction with them, will no longer be tempted to turn his activity toward the 'flesh', running thus the risk of being affected by 'anger, desires and unseemly pleasures'.<sup>16</sup> Or, as Maximus formulates it further on: 'Through reason and knowledge, without fight or struggle, the contemplative abides to what is true, and apart from that he refuses to see anything else because of the pleasure that he has in it'. Hence, such a person will not only have the principles of true knowledge, but also possess within his soul as a disposition all the virtues without any more need for ascetic struggle, as he has the right reasons that give him the possibility of free choice (τοῦ ἐφ' ἡμῖν λόγους):

Indeed, his rational part carries with itself all the strongest impassive reason-principles of what depends upon us, according to which all virtue and knowledge consist, as they are powers of the rational soul, which do not at all need body in order to exist, but do not refuse to use it in order to become manifest at the right moment.<sup>17</sup>

As we shall further see, Maximus insists that virtue primarily exist as an inner disposition of the soul, a power of the soul, without any need of body in order to exist. To be sure, virtue will 'at the right moment' manifest itself in good actions, and this cannot be done without bodily organs. However, this manifestation of virtue is not its essence. This is again a traditional thesis, already defended by the Stoics: virtue is primarily a disposition of the soul and action is an activity of the rational soul in accordance with right

<sup>15</sup> 'Ο τοῖνυν εὐσεβῶς διὰ θεωρίας κατανοήσας ὡς ἔχει τὰ ὄντα καὶ διὰ βουλῆς λογικῆς ἐστοχασμένως τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὸν περὶ αὐτῶν ὁρισάμενος λόγον καὶ φυλάττων ἑαυτῷ τὴν κρίσιν, μᾶλλον δὲ ἑαυτὸν τῇ κρίσει ἀπαρέγκλιτον, πᾶσαν ὁμοῦ συλλαβὴν ἔχει τὴν ἀρετὴν, πρὸς οὐδὲν ἄλλο μετὰ τὴν ἐγνωσμένην ἀλήθειαν ἔτι κινούμενος, καὶ πάντα παρήλθε διὰ σπουδῆς, οὐδενὸς τὸ παράπαν λόγον ποιούμενος τῶν ὅσα σαρκὸς καὶ κόσμου ἐστὶ καὶ λέγεται, ἐνδιαθέτως ἔχων ἥδη τῷ λόγῳ περιεχομένην ἀμάχως τὴν πράξιν (1108c–d).

<sup>16</sup> See 112a–b: 'In what sense is the flesh a cloud and a veil?'

<sup>17</sup> τοῦ ἐφ' ἡμῖν πάντα ἑαυτῷ τοῦ διανοητικοῦ τοὺς κρατίστους ἀπαθείς ἐπικομιζομένου λόγους, καθ' οὓς πᾶσα ἀρετὴ καὶ γνῶσις ἐστὶ καὶ ὑφέστηκεν, ὡς δυνάμεις ὄντας ψυχῆς λογικῆς, πρὸς μὲν τὸ εἶναι σώματος οὐδόλως χρῆζοντας, πρὸς δὲ τὸ φανῆναι διὰ τὰς εἰρημέναις αἰτίας κατὰ καιρὸν αὐτῷ χρῆσθαι οὐκ ἀναινομένους (1108d–1109a).

judgement accomplished through the body.<sup>18</sup> In the Platonic interpretation this becomes a more radical view: the soul is now taken to be an incorporeal entity as also the virtue inhering in it, whereas for the Stoics both soul and virtue are corporeal entities.

## II. *Nemesius on Practical and Theoretical Reasoning*

In confirmation of his view that virtue primarily consists in the inward activities of the rational soul, Maximus adduces a passage from Nemesius' treatise *On the nature of Man*:

to the rational part [of the soul] belong specifically the thoughts of intelligible objects, the virtues, the sciences, the reasons principles of technical knowledge, the capacity of choice, the capacity of deliberation, and generically judgments, assents, avoidances, impulses.<sup>19</sup>

This summary may come from a handbook of Stoic inspiration, as is clear from parallel doxographic texts in Sextus Empiricus and Aetius. Of Stoic origin may also be the distinction between what is specific and what is generic, which is found in other Stoic divisions, though it is not so clear how to interpret it.<sup>20</sup> Generic seem to be activities that can be attributed to the rational soul as principle of action (practical judgements and the impulses following from them), specific are particular functions or dispositions of that soul. Whatever the original meaning of the distinction may have been, Maximus interprets the specific activities as those that only belong to *theory*, the generic as following from our cognitive power according to *reason*.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See the Stoic definition used by Clemens in his *Paedagogus* 1.13: *SVF* 3.293.

<sup>19</sup> Φασί γάρ τοῦ διανοητικοῦ εἶναι ἰδικῶς μὲν τὰς νοήσεις τῶν νοητῶν τὰς ἀρετὰς τὰς ἐπιστήμας τοὺς τῶν τεχνῶν λόγους τὸ προαιρετικὸν καὶ τὸ βουλευτικόν, γενικῶς δὲ τὰς κρίσεις τὰς συγκαταθέσεις τὰς ἀποφυγὰς τὰς ὁρμὰς (1109a). Cf. Nemesius *De nat. hom.* 12 (p. 68.6–9). That Nemesius is following here a Stoic handbook is evident from parallel texts in Sextus Empiricus and Aetius (see Sharples-van der Eijk [2008] 117, n. 586).

<sup>20</sup> See Diog. Laert. 7.132 (but there on the division of physics) and Mansfeld-Runia (2009) 98 (subspecies) and 104.

<sup>21</sup> καὶ τὰς μὲν εἶναι μόνης τῆς κατὰ νοῦν θεωρίας, τὰς δὲ τῆς κατὰ τὸν λόγον ἐπιστημονικῆς δυνάμεως (1109a). In opposition τὰς μὲν refers usually to the former, τὰς δὲ to the latter, but the reverse order is also possible, though rarely: 'the latter ... the former' (see Liddell-Scott *sub* ο VI). The problem is that Nemesius does not clearly distinguish between practical and theoretical activities. The last group seems certainly to refer to acts of practical reasoning, but the faculty of deliberation and choice is mentioned in the first group. Maximus also speaks of ἐπιστημονικῆς δυνάμεως which might refer to the ἐπιστήμας mentioned in the first class. This however is not a sufficient reason to deviate from the standard use of the opposition τὰς μὲν ... τὰς δὲ as 'the former ... the latter'.

By using the phrase *διὰ λόγου καὶ θεωρίας* Gregory thus introduced in a comprehensive way the principles of virtue and knowledge, which are effective in the life of all saints. According to *θεωρία* they devote their life to the 'knowledge of God' (*τῇ κατανόησει τοῦ θεοῦ*),<sup>22</sup> according to *logos* they imprint in their soul through the virtues the divine form they contemplate, connecting in this way the theoretical and the practical dimension of philosophy.

In order to further explain the relation between theoretical and practical reasoning Maximus quotes in the next paragraph another text from 'those who pursue with precision arguments about human affairs', i.e. from Nemesius. In chapter 41 of his treatise Nemesius examines the question 'for what reason we are born with self-determination'. According to Nemesius the possibility of self-determination is necessarily implied in the rational character of the soul, which manifests itself both in theoretical reasoning and in practical judgment.

Of the rational [soul] some part is theoretical, another practical; the theoretical is what considers how things are, while the practical is the deliberative, which defines the right reason for things to be done. They also call the theoretical part intellect, the practical reason, the theoretical wisdom, the practical prudence.<sup>23</sup>

Nemesius argues that everyone who deliberates about a certain action does so because he is convinced that the outcome is up to him and not fully determined by external factors. Hence, someone who is able to deliberate is also a self-determining being. Maximus had anticipated this conclusion earlier when he said that we find in our rational souls the 'principles of what depend upon us'. Thanks to the explicit quotation of Nemesius it now also becomes evident that he was already exploiting this passage in the above quoted text: 'When someone has understood through theory how things are and has determined through rational deliberation the reason concerning them':

Maximus, 1108c: 'Ὁ διὰ θεωρίας κατανόησας ὡς ἔχει τὰ ὄντα καὶ διὰ βουλῆς λογικῆς τὸν περὶ αὐτῶν ὀρισάμενος λόγον

Nemesius, p. 117, 17–19: καὶ θεωρητικὸν μὲν τὸ κατανοοῦν ὡς ἔχει τὰ ὄντα, πρακτικὸν δὲ τὸ βουλευτικόν, τὸ ὀρίζον τοῖς πρακτοῖς τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον.

<sup>22</sup> This phrase too is taken from Nemesius: see 77.11–12; 118.16.

<sup>23</sup> φασὶν οἱ τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς πραγμάτων δι' ἀκριβείας μετελθόντες τοὺς λόγους τοῦ λογικοῦ τὸ μὲν εἶναι θεωρητικόν, τὸ δὲ πρακτικόν, καὶ θεωρητικὸν μὲν τὸ κατανοοῦν ὡς ἔχει τὰ ὄντα, πρακτικὸν δὲ τὸ βουλευτικόν, τὸ ὀρίζον τοῖς πρακτοῖς τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον· καὶ καλοῦσι τὸ μὲν θεωρητικὸν νοῦν, τὸ δὲ πρακτικὸν λόγον, καὶ τὸ μὲν σοφίαν, τὸ δὲ φρόνησιν (1109b).

The parallels make clear that Maximus used this passage from Nemesius on the distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning. Maximus, however, gives the argument a quite different turn. Whereas Nemesius only made the distinction as a start of an argument to show that the act of deliberation and choice belongs to the sphere of practical reasoning, not to that of theory, Maximus finds in this text a confirmation of his view on the subordination of practical reasoning to theory or contemplation. It is striking that in his summary τοῖς πρακτοῖς is replaced by περὶ αὐτῶν, which can only refer to the τὰ ὄντα. In this rewriting the essential difference between practical and theoretical reasoning becomes unclear. What remains is a distinction between the rational and the intellectual, the first being subordinated to the latter.<sup>24</sup> We find such a subordination of praxis to theory also in Plotinus' celebrated treatise *On Theory* 3.8 [30].<sup>25</sup>

Nemesius makes in the chapter on self-determination the further claim that rational beings share with all created beings that they are subject to change. To be sure, they are not composed 'out of a substrate matter' as are all corporeal beings. Nevertheless they share with corporeal beings the fact of having come to existence and are therefore τρεπτοί. If rational beings have the capacity to determine their own life and are also subject to change, their self-determination is ambivalent. They may choose a good or a bad life, be subject to evil and sin or become virtuous. Yet some are more liable to change than others:

Of the immaterial beings those which exist in the regions surrounding the earth and busy themselves with practical matters by their association with human beings are more changeable than others. But those who, because of the superiority of their nature come close to God in relation and have born the fruit of blessedness by their knowledge of him, being turned only towards themselves and God, have altogether become estranged from practical affairs and matter, and have also adapted themselves to God and contemplation, and they remain unchanged, self determining through their being rational, but unchanged for the reasons given. And no wonder, for of human beings also those who have become contemplative and have separated themselves from practical matters, have remained unchanged.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The opposition between νοῦς/σοφία and λόγος/φρόνησις is also a major theme in *Mystagogia* 5.

<sup>25</sup> See the contribution of Linguisti in this volume, 184–185.

<sup>26</sup> ὅσαι μὲν ἐν τοῖς περιγείοις εἰσὶ, τῇ κοινωνίᾳ τῇ πρὸς ἀνθρώπους περὶ τὰ πρακτὰ καταγινόμεναι, μᾶλλον εἰσι τῶν ἄλλων τρεπταί· ὅσαι δὲ δι' ἀκρότητα φύσεως τῷ θεῷ κατὰ σχέσιν πλησιάζουσι καὶ τῇ τοῦτου κατανοήσει τὸ μακάριον καρποῦνται πρὸς ἑαυτάς καὶ τὸν θεὸν μόνον ἐστραμμέναι, τῶν μὲν πρακτῶν καὶ τῆς ὕλης παντάπασιν ἑαυτάς ἀπηλοτρίωσαν, τῇ δὲ θεωρίᾳ καὶ τῷ θεῷ προσωκείωσαν, καὶ μένουσιν ἄτρεπτοι, αὐτεξούσιοι μὲν οὔσαι διὰ τὸ λογικαί εἶναι, οὐ μὴν τρεπόμεναι

We are here no longer in a Stoic, but in a Christian Platonic context. As the following section in the text makes clear, Nemesis is referring to the distinction between demons and angels: demons live close to the earth and human affairs whereas angels are exalted immaterial beings (though according to Christian belief even the angels can fall and become evil). That there are such immaterial beings that are almost unchanged should not surprise us as even among human beings we find some people who have attained this state of immutability by separating themselves as much as possible from practical matters. Nemesis may have had in mind the Christian ascetic saints who devoted almost their whole life to contemplation, but the same point could be made about Platonic philosophers, such as Plotinus describes them in his treatise *On Happiness* (*Enn.* 1.6 [1]). We notice here again how Maximus adopts Nemesis' text, quoting parts of it, to construe his own argument. The whole argument is now about differentiating human beings who live in contemplation from those who get lost in practical matters. This is how he rewrites his source. 'Those who have examined the principles of the perfection of virtue' (that is Nemesis) say that:

those who have not yet become pure of the *association* with matter through their relation to it *busy themselves with practical things*, still having their judgment of reality mixed up, and *are changeable*, for they have not yet relinquished their relationship to what is changeable. *But those who, because of the superiority of their virtue,*<sup>27</sup> *come close to God in relation and have born the fruit of blessedness by their knowledge of him, being turned only towards themselves and God, have altogether become estranged from practical affairs and matter* by a sincere breaking with the bonds of material relations, *and adapted themselves to contemplation and to God*. Therefore, they say, *they also remain changeless*, no longer having any relation with matter. For someone who is dominated in relation by matter necessarily comes to change in a way contrary to nature along with matter which is itself naturally changed.<sup>28</sup>

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διὰ τὰς προειρημένους αἰτίας. καὶ θαυμά γε οὐδέν. καὶ γὰρ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὅσοι θεωρητικοὶ γενόμενοι τῶν πρακτῶν ἑαυτοὺς ἐχώρισαν, ἔμειναν ἄτρεπτοι (118.13–22).

<sup>27</sup> Maximus replaces φύσεως with ἀρετῆς to make clear that the saints are not superior through their nature but through their virtue. In Nemesis the phrase refers to the higher status of angels, who are superior by nature.

<sup>28</sup> Εἰ δὲ χρὴ καὶ ἄλλως σαφέστερον τοῦτο ποιήσασθαι πάλιν· οἱ τῆς κατ' ἀρετὴν τελειότητος τοὺς λόγους γυμνάσαντές φασι τοὺς μήπω τῆς πρὸς τὴν ὕλην κατὰ τὴν σχέσιν κοινωνίας καθαροὺς γεγονότας περὶ τὰ πρακτὰ καταγίνεσθαι, μικτῆς οὐσης αὐτοῖς ἔτι τῆς περὶ τὰ ὄντα κρίσεως, καὶ εἰσι τρεπτοί, μήπω τὴν περὶ τὰ τρεπτὰ σχέσιν ἀποθέμενοι, τοὺς δὲ δι' ἀρετῆς ἀκρότητα τῷ θεῷ κατὰ σχέσιν πλησιάζοντας καὶ τῇ τούτου κατανοήσει τὸ μακάριον καρπουμένους, πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς μόνον καὶ τὸν θεὸν ἐστραμμένους τῷ ῥήξαι γνησίως τῆς ὕλικῆς σχέσεως τὰ δεσμά, τῶν μὲν πρακτῶν καὶ τῆς ὕλης παντελῶς ἡλλοτριώσθαι, τῇ δὲ θεωρίᾳ καὶ τῷ θεῷ προσωκειώσθαι· Διό, φασίν, καὶ μένουσιν ἄτρεπτοι, μὴ ἔχοντες ἔτι τὴν πρὸς τὴν ὕλην σχέσιν, καθ' ἣν τῇ ὕλῃ φυσικῶς ἀλλοιούμενη παρὰ φύσιν συναλλοιούσθαι ἐξ ἀνάγκης πέφυκεν ὁ τῇ ὕλῃ κατὰ τὴν σχέσιν κεκρατημένος (1109c–d).



### III. *The Manifestation of Virtue in Action*

We may now understand how the saints can acquire, as Gregory said, 'through reason and theory' all principles of virtue and knowledge. For having devoted themselves by theoretical contemplation to the understanding of God, they imprint by means of the virtues the divine form in themselves. Therefore, Gregory did not think that it was absolutely necessary to name explicitly *praxis*, which is the expression of virtue through the body, as he knew that this action 'does not produce virtue, but simply manifests it and is the servant only of divine thoughts and reasoning'.<sup>29</sup> Maybe, Maximus suggests, even if Gregory did not mention explicitly *praxis*, he named it indirectly by referring to 'its cause, not its matter', that is, to the *logos* in the soul, not to the body wherein the action is expressed. In fact, the cause of practical action is the *logos* in the soul, which Gregory understands as 'a habit that has nothing opposed to it'.<sup>30</sup> Again a surprising statement, as we know that all rational powers stand open for opposites and in particular for the opposition vice-virtue. However, as we have noticed before, the contemplative person does no longer need ascetic effort or fight against the passions to be virtuous. He remains within the truth unmoved just as the Stoic sage will no longer have to fight to be virtuous.

The manifestation of the inner dispositions in bodily actions is not essential to virtue, which is as such fully established in the soul. In the bodily actions only some 'shadowy reflections' (σκιάσματα) of virtue are displayed, and this happens not for the sake of virtue itself, which does not need it for its own perfection. The display of virtue in outward virtuous actions is needed to help other human beings. It may give, says Maximus, some assistance to people in need, helping the poor, the sick, consoling those in sorrow, so that they too may celebrate the providence of God. Another reason to express the virtues in actions is to set up a godlike model of life that may be imitated by people who are not yet virtuous in order that they too may put off the shamefulness of evil and become worthy of God. Maximus insists, however, that this manifestation of virtue in external actions is not essential to it. As in the Platonic tradition he understands virtue as being seated primarily in the incorporeal invisible soul.

<sup>29</sup> γινώσκων μὴ ἀρετῆς αὐτὴν εἶναι ποιητικὴν, ἀλλ' ἐκφαντικὴν καὶ μόνων τῶν θεῶν νοημάτων τε καὶ λογισμῶν ὑπουργόν (1109b).

<sup>30</sup> ἐκ τῆς αἰτίας ἄρα τὴν πράξιν κατὰ τὸ εἶκος, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐκ τῆς ὕλης ὠνόμασεν ὁ διδάσκαλος, λόγον τὴν μηδὲν ἔχουσαν ἀντικείμενον ἕξιν προσαγορεύσας (1109b–c).

Hence, if there were no-one who needed to experience some good or stood in need of a model to be shaped to virtue, it would not be absurd to say that everyone would be completely sufficient for himself and arrayed with the graces of the virtues in his soul, even without the manifestation of the virtues through the body.<sup>31</sup>

Maximus seems to adopt unquestionably the ancient philosophical ideal of virtue as self-sufficiency and inwardness, reducing the outward acts of virtue to an accidental manifestation.

#### IV. *The Three Motions of the Soul*

To explain further how the soul may acquire through theoretical contemplation the virtues Maximus enters into a digression on the three motions of the soul, which is inspired by his reading of pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>32</sup> He distinguishes in the soul three general kinds of motions or activities, which correspond to three cognitive faculties: intellect, reason and sense.

1. Through a unified intuition of the intellect, such as cannot be expressed in language, the soul moves around God without knowing him in any way from anything that exists. This corresponds to the Dionysian negative theology.
2. Through the motion of reason the soul is capable of knowing the unknown God in a causal manner (κατ' αἰτίαν), as He is discovered through arguments as the cause of all things. The soul thus brings forth in itself through its epistemic activity the concepts that give form and shape to what it only knows as cause of all beings, not as what it is in itself without relation to all.<sup>33</sup> This is the level of affirmative theology.
3. The motion according to sense perception is a composite one: 'touching on things outside the soul impresses upon itself, as from certain symbols, the reasons of things seen'.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> ὥς, εἴγε μηδεὶς ἦν ὁ εὖ παθεῖν δεόμενος ἢ ὁ πρὸς ἀρετὴν παραδείγματι τυπωθῆναι ὀφείλων, αὐτὸν ἕκαστον ἀρκεῖν ἑαυτῷ πάντως, ταῖς κατὰ ψυχὴν τῶν ἀρετῶν χάρισιν ἀβρυνόμενον, καὶ δίχ᾽ αὐτῶν διὰ τοῦ σώματος πρὸς τὸ ἐμφανὲς ἀποδείξεως λέγειν οὐκ ἄτοπον (1108c).

<sup>32</sup> See Dionys. *De div. nom.* 9.153.10–9.154.6 ed. Suchla. See also appendix.

<sup>33</sup> τοὺς ἐπ' αὐτῇ φυσικοὺς πάντας λόγους, τοῦ κατ' αἰτίαν μόνον ἐγνωσμένου μορφωτικοὺς ὄντας, ἑαυτῇ δι' ἐνέργειας κατ' ἐπιστήμην ἐντίθεται (1113a). The phrase κατ' αἰτίαν is well known from Proclus.

<sup>34</sup> τὴν δὲ σύνθετον, καθ' ἣν τῶν ἐκτὸς ἐφαπτομένη, ὥς ἐκ τινων συμβόλων, τῶν ὁρατῶν τοὺς λόγους πρὸς ἑαυτὴν ἀναμάσσεται (1113a). Cf. Dionysius *De div. nom.* 154.4: ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξωθεν ὥσπερ ἀπὸ τινων συμβόλων.

According to Maximus we may learn from the fathers how to make a natural and not perverted use of those three motions so that we may pass beyond the present age towards unification with God.

(1) We should make sense perception, which possesses the spiritual reasons of things seen, ascend by means of reason up to intellect, and (2) unite reason, which possesses the reasons of all beings, to intellect and finally (3) raise the intellect to God, having it freed of motion around all beings and made it rest from its own natural activity,

Maximus distinguishes the righteous contemplation of the world such as the saints practise it from the way ordinary people behold and know things in this world. As all animals most people have primarily a material and sensual motivation and are only interested in what they see in function of their needs and greed and passions. But as Aristotle already said in the celebrated opening pages of the *Metaphysics*, human beings have a desire to know beyond all practical need. This pure theoretical motivation is manifested in the experience of 'wonder' about phenomena of which we search for causes. Continuing this ancient motive Maximus describes how the saints behold the sensible things with this contemplative interest, not for any needs or use,

but in order to praise in many ways God, who is and appears through all things and in all things, and to gather together for themselves every capacity for wonder and every occasion for glorying.<sup>35</sup>

The saints achieve this contemplation by cultivating and refining their cognitive capacities so that they are used in the right way. In fact, we can use intellect and reason and perception in two different directions, either towards God or to the material world. For, as Maximus explains, we have besides this sensible perception also intelligible perception, just as reason has besides its inward disposition (τῷ ἐνδιαθέτῳ) also its expressed form (κατὰ προφοράν); and of the intellect too there are two modes: 'the intelligible intellect' and the 'passive intellect' (παθητικόν)

which they [the philosophers] call also the imagination of the living being, by which also the other animals recognize both one another and us and the places they pass through. And the experts in these matters say that sense perception is established around it, being the organ by which it can be perceptive of what it imagines.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> ἀλλ' ἵνα τὸν διὰ πάντων καὶ ἐν πάσιν ὄντα τε καὶ φαινόμενον θεὸν πολυτρόπως ὑμνήσωσι καὶ πολλὴν ἑαυτοῖς συναγείρωσι θαύματος δύναμιν καὶ δοξολογίας ὑπόθεσιν (1113d–1116a).

<sup>36</sup> Ψυχὴν γὰρ εἰληφότες παρὰ θεοῦ νοῦν καὶ λόγον καὶ αἴσθησιν ἔχουσιν, πρὸς τῇ νοητῇ καὶ

The 'experts' here can only be the philosophers who, following Aristotle's suggestion in *De anima* 3.10.433a9–12 considered the *phantasia* as a passive intellect. The doctrine is often discussed in Neoplatonic psychology, for instance in Philoponus' commentary on *De anima*. It was also noticed that perception functions as the faculty that makes us aware of what we have retained in our imagination.<sup>37</sup> Even more popular in Late Antiquity was the distinction between two modes of *logos*: the inner disposition and the *logos* forwarded in spoken or written language. This distinction of Stoic origin was adopted by the Neoplatonic philosophers and by the Christian authors (who used it in their discussion of the Son as *Logos*). Maximus may again have been inspired by Nemesius, who devoted chapter 14 to that distinction. That perception cannot just be reduced to the sense perception is also a Neoplatonic doctrine. The term αἴσθησις often has the general sense of becoming aware, to apprehend, and is also used for the apprehension of acts and objects of thought.<sup>38</sup> Wherever Maximus may have found this threefold distinction, he exploits it in an original way to show how the human soul is capable of moving in two directions—towards God or towards the material things—depending on how it is using its cognitive faculties, according to nature or against nature. The contemplative ascent to God is not an unnatural process, as some of its detractors might say: it represents for Maximus the most perfect fulfilment of our human nature as a rational-intellective being.

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ταύτην τὴν αἴσθησιν, ὥσπερ καὶ λόγον πρὸς τῷ ἐνδιαθέτω τὸν κατὰ προφορὰν, καὶ νοῦν πρὸς τῷ νοητῷ τὸν παθητικόν, ὃν καὶ φαντασίαν καλοῦσι τοῦ ζώου, καθ' ὃν καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ζῶα καὶ ἄλλα καὶ ἡμᾶς καὶ τοὺς τόπους οὗς διώδευσαν ἐπιγινωσκούσι, περὶ ἣν συνίστασθαι τὴν αἴσθησιν φασιν οἱ σοφοὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα, ὅργανον αὐτῆς οὖσαν ἀντιληπτικὸν τῶν αὐτῇ φαντασθέντων (116a).

<sup>37</sup> See Philop. *In De an.* 5.38–6.13: 'Imagination receives from sense perception the impressions of the perceptible objects and re-shapes these within itself, which is why Aristotle also calls it a passive intellect: intellect in so far as it has the object of knowledge within itself and grasps it by straightforward apprehension, as does the intellect, and not by means of proof, and "passive" because its knowing is accompanied by impressions and does not occur without its giving shape' (tr. of van der Eijk, 2005). The identification of the passive intellect with *phantasia* is often made in Neoplatonism. See Syrian. *In Met.* 110.33–35; Procl. *In Remp.* 2.52.7; 77.16–17; 107.29; *In Tim.* 1.244.21; 3.159.9; *In Eucl.* 53.3; Philop. *In De an.* 6.1; *De intellectu* 106.28: 'dixit phantasiā intellectum passivum'; ps.-Philop. *In De an.* 490.23; 506.24; 523.29; and Priscian. (ps.-Simplicius) 17.2–8. See also footnote 71 (on p. 119) in van der Eijk's translation. Van der Eijk notices: 'actually there is no such statement in the DA'. The Platonic commentators, however, found this statement in *De An.* 3.10.433a9–12. Maximus must have found this doctrine in one of the schoolbooks in the Alexandrian tradition. On one point, however, he misinterprets his source: according to the commentators only the *phantasia* of rational human animals can be called a passive intellect, not the *phantasia* of irrational animals.

<sup>38</sup> See *Lexicon Plotinianum*, s.v. αἴσθησις b) 'perception other than physical'.

V. *The Three General Ways of God's Causality*

Using the three cognitive faculties in an intelligent manner 'not for themselves but to approach God', the saints learned the three general ways, in which God is the cause of all things, and in particular of rational beings. He is not only the cause of 'being' (εἶναι) for all things, but also their providential cause and ultimate end and thus provides them with 'well being' and 'eternal being' (εὖ εἶναι καὶ ἀεὶ εἶναι).<sup>39</sup> Whereas the two extreme terms, being and eternal being, only depend on God as cause, the middle one [well being or its opposite ill being], which connects the extremes, also depends on our own choice and motion. According to the type of life we lead, virtuous or the opposite, we may find our eternal destination as either blessedness or damnation. Therefore, we have to direct all our desire and motion in such a way that we may attain again the cause from where we have received our being. For where else could we find our 'well being' if it is not from the cause of our being? What profit would a being that is not cause of its on being have in turning towards itself or turning to other beings that are not cause of its being? Only in returning to God, the cause of its existence, may a being find the reason of its existence or its 'true being'.<sup>40</sup> Maximus' reasoning reminds us of Proclus' argument in proposition 31 of *The Elements of Theology*, in which he argues for the identity of the Origin and End of all things:

All things desire the Good, and each attains it through the mediation of its own proximate cause: therefore each has appetite of its own cause also. Through that which gives its being (εἶναι) it attains its well-being (εὖ εἶναι); the source of its well-being is the primary object of its appetite.<sup>41</sup>

In order then that we may receive from the cause from where we have received our being also our well being, we have to make use of our natural powers in the right way avoiding all abuse and perversion whereby they are only at the service of our bodily needs. Therefore, the saints train the *intellect* to think about God alone, educate *reason* to become the 'interpreter and hymnist' of what they have thought and to discuss the modes of behaviour that correspond with what is thought; they also teach and ennoble by reason our faculty of *perception* so that it may serve as a mean to discover the incorporeal reasons that are expressed in the sensible world.

<sup>39</sup> *Ambig.* 116b; see also LXI, 1392a–d. On this important doctrine see Thunberg (1965) 369–371.

<sup>40</sup> Τί γὰρ ἂν καὶ ἔσται τῷ μὴ ἑαυτοῦ κατὰ τὸ εἶναι αἰτίῳ, πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς ἴσως λογισάμενοι εἶπον, πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ἢ ἄλλο τι παρὰ τὸν θεὸν κινουμένῳ, τὸ κέρδος, ὅποτε εἰς τὸν τοῦ εἶναι λόγον οὐδὲν ἑαυτῷ ἄφ' ἑαυτοῦ ἢ ἄλλου τινὸς παρὰ τὸν θεὸν περιποιῆσαι δυνησεται; (116c).

<sup>41</sup> Procl. *El. theol.* 31 (tr. Dodds).

Having thus wisely steered, through intellect and reason, the soul, like a ship, they passed dry-shod through *this fluid and unstable*<sup>42</sup> road of life, which is borne in various ways and swamps the senses.<sup>43</sup>

## VI. *The Transfiguration: A Model of Perfect Contemplation*

Maximus illustrates his view on the ascent of the soul to God through contemplation by offering an allegorical interpretation of various biblical stories, culminating in the narration of the transfiguration of Christ on the mount Tabor. The disciples who ascended together with Christ on the mountain 'beheld Him transfigured, unapproachable by the light of his face and awesome by the brightness of his clothes'.<sup>44</sup> That the disciples were granted such a vision clearly indicates that they had already passed over from the fleshy life to a spiritual life. The divine Spirit working in them had transformed their perceptive faculty, 'lifting the veils of the passions from the intellectual activity in them'.

It is of course impossible to discuss here all the elements of Maximus' allegorical interpretation of the Tabor story. We will only discuss how he interprets the 'whitened clothes' of Christ, of which Maximus offers two possible interpretations. They may either be a symbol of the words (ῥήματα) of Holy Scripture or a symbol of creation itself. In fact, the written words of Scripture only become shining, clear and lucid for those people who have acquired a perfect knowledge of God and have liberated themselves from every passionate attachment to the sensible world and the flesh. Only they are capable of understanding the meaning of Scripture 'without any riddling puzzle or symbolic shadow', revealing the *Logos* that lays hidden within the words.<sup>45</sup> In a similar way also the different sensible forms in the natural world can be understood as the shining cloths of Christ-*Logos*, as they are covering the different creative *logoi* expressed in them. 'Through the judicious variety of the diverse forms that complete it, the creation reveals, on the analogy of a garment, the dignity of the one bearing it, i.e.

<sup>42</sup> 'fluid and unstable' is the material world, which is in a perpetual fluxus. The expression comes from Dionys. *De div. nom.* 9.133.11; see also Maximus *Amb. ad Thomam* 5.74–84.

<sup>43</sup> διὰ τοῦ νοῦ καὶ τοῦ λόγου, ὥσπερ ναῦν, σοφῶς τὴν ψυχὴν οἰακίσαντες, τὴν ὑγρὰν ταύτην καὶ ἄστατον καὶ ἄλλοτε ἄλλως φερομένην καὶ τὴν αἰσθησιν ἐπικλύζουσιν τοῦ βίου κέλευθον ἀβρόχοις διώδουσιν ἔχουσι (116d).

<sup>44</sup> On the interpretation of the transfiguration (*Matth.* 17.1–13) see 1125dff.

<sup>45</sup> παντὸς γριφώδους αἰνίγματος καὶ συμβολικοῦ σκιάσματος χωρὶς νοουμένων καὶ τὸν ἐν αὐτοῖς ὄντα τε καὶ καλυπτόμενον παραδηλούντων λόγον (1128b).

the power of the creative *Logos*.<sup>46</sup> But, as is the case with the reading of Scripture, this deeper understanding of the sensible world is only possible once the 'filthy prejudice' is eliminated of those people who only use sense perception and are deceived by it.

Both explanations of the garments can be accommodated to the *Logos*, who is both the Creator of the physical world and the Lawgiver. Both in the world and in Scripture the *Logos* is revealed while remaining hidden through obscurity. This symbolic manifestation of the *Logos* is required to exclude the unworthy from acceding to what is inaccessible. We therefore need revelation both through a written text and through a sensible cosmos, or as Maximus calls it, both through the written law and the natural law. Both are of equal value and teach the same things, and neither has more or less than the other, but both are interchangeable:

the written law being identical with the natural in its power, the natural law with the written as a habit, and thus indicate and reveal the same *Logos*, in one case through writing and what is manifest, in the other case through understanding and what is concealed.<sup>47</sup>

For our purpose, however, we only focus on how to decipher the natural order of the universe, which is constituted, in the manner of a book, as a harmonious web or texture:

For as letters and syllables it has what comes first from our perspective, the proximate and particular things and the bodies that are engrossed by the many qualities that come together; as words it has what is more universal than these, more remote and more subtle; out of these [letters, syllables and words] the *Logos*, which engraved itself with wisdom and was ineffably inscribed in them, is completed in reading and thus provides some insight only of *that* it is, not of *what* it somehow is, leading on through the pious combination of different imaginations into one conjecture of the truth, making itself in an analogous way seen through the visible things as the creator.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> διὰ τῆς τῶν αὐτὴν συμπληρούντων διαφορῶν εἰδῶν σοφῆς ποικιλίας, ἀναλόγως ἱματίου τρόπον, τὴν ἀξίαν τοῦ φοροῦντος τὴν τοῦ γενεσιουργοῦ λόγου δύναμιν μηνυούσης (1128c).

<sup>47</sup> τὸν μὲν γραπτὸν τῷ φυσικῷ κατὰ τὴν δύναμιν, τὸν δὲ φυσικὸν ἔμπαλιν τῷ γραπτῷ κατὰ τὴν ἔξιν, καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν μηνύοντα καὶ καλύπτοντα λόγον, τὸ μὲν τῇ λέξει καὶ τῷ φαινομένῳ, τὸ δὲ τῇ νοήσει καὶ τῷ κρυπτομένῳ (1129b).

<sup>48</sup> βίβλου τρόπον, τὸ ἐναρμόνιον τοῦ παντὸς ὕφασμα ἔχοντα, γράμματα μὲν καὶ συλλαβὰς ἐχούσης τὰ πρὸς ἡμᾶς πρῶτα προσεχῇ τε καὶ μερικὰ καὶ πολλαῖς παχυνόμενα κατὰ σύνοδον ποιότησι σώματα, ῥήματα δὲ τὰ τούτων καθολικώτερα πόρρω τε ὄντα καὶ λεπτότερα, ἐξ ὧν σοφῶς ὁ διαχαράξας καὶ ἀρρήτως αὐτοῖς ἐγκεχαραγμένος λόγος ἀναγινωσκόμενος ἀπαρτίζεται, τὴν ὅτι μόνον ἔστιν, οὐχ' ὅ, τι ποτὲ δέ ἐστιν, οἰανοῦν παρεχόμενος ἔννοιαν καὶ διὰ τῆς εὐσεβοῦς τῶν διαφορῶν

In this beautiful metaphorical reading of the created world as a book of revelation Maximus again thoughtfully exploits various elements of the philosophical tradition. As Aristotle, he makes a distinction between what is by nature first and what is first from our empirical perspective. From a human perspective the particular sensible things or bodies come first. They are the letters out of which all words are composed. The words themselves correspond to the universals, such as animal, rational, body, that are by nature first. In deciphering the language of the world we may discover the *Logos* inscribed in it through the many *logoi* expressed and materialized as it were in the various things. We never, however, will discover starting from the sensible world what divine *Logos* is, but only that it exists.<sup>49</sup>

Given the way the *Logos* is both revealed and hidden through the different garments, in which it is clothed, Maximus warns us against all forms of affirmative theology that are based on a literal understanding of scripture or an empirical argument starting from the sensible creation.

Let us manifest through negation the one who is hidden and pass away every power of imagining in shapes and riddles the truth and rather rise up ineffably according to the Spirit from the letter and from what is appearing to the Logos himself, than become to conceal through position the one who is appearing.<sup>50</sup>

Maximus confronts us here with the paradoxes of the interpretation of an indirect revelation. If we remain on the level of the sensible appearances and the *littera* of the biblical text and develop from these facts a positive theology, we run the risk of *hiding* through *affirmation* the *Logos*, who is appearing through the symbols, whereas by *negating* all attributes of the sensible and created world we may in fact *reveal* the one who is hidden. Therefore the Christians have to avoid the dangers threatening them from both sides, from the pagans and the Jews. If we are incapable of reading the world spiritually as a manifestation of the *logos* present in it, we may become like the pagans (ἐλληνικῶς) and start ‘worshipping the creation instead of the Creator’ (*Rom.* 1.25), believing that there is nothing superior to what is seen or more magnificent than the objects of sense. In this idolatric approach to the world

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φαντασιῶν συλλογῆς εἰς μίαν τοῦ ἀληθοῦς εἰκασίαν ἐνάγων, ἀναλόγως ἑαυτὸν διὰ τῶν ὁρατῶν ὡς γενεσιουργὸς ἐνορᾶσθαι διδοῦς (1128d–1129a).

<sup>49</sup> On the distinction between knowing that God exists and not knowing what He is, see Festugière (1949) 564–565 and (1954) 6–17.

<sup>50</sup> Εἴη δὲ ἡμῖν τοῦ δι' ἀποφασεως ἐκφαίνειν κρυπτόμενον καὶ πᾶσαν σχημάτων τε καὶ αἰνιγμάτων τὸ ἀληθὲς εἰκονίζουσαν δύναμιν παρελθεῖν μάλλον καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν τὸν λόγον ἀπὸ τοῦ γράμματος καὶ τῶν φαινομένων κατὰ τὴν τοῦ πνεύματος δύναμιν ἀρρήτως ἀναβιβάζεσθαι ἢ τοῦ φαινόμενον κρύπτειν διὰ τῆς θέσεως γίνεσθαι (1129c).



we become murderers of the Logos (φονευταὶ τοῦ λόγου γενόμενοι). Similarly if, in our understanding of the revelation, we adhere to the letter, and only consider the body as important (understanding for instance God's promise as the possession of a land, or as living a long prosperous life), we read the text in a Jewish way and become similar to the 'deicides' (τοῖς θεοκτόνοις), who do not discern the *Logos* who through the flesh came among us.<sup>51</sup> As saint Paul said, 'the letter kills, but the spirit gives life' (2 *Cor.* 3.6). Maximus draws on the term 'deicides' often used by Christians to designate the Jews who did not recognize the *Logos* in his temporal incarnation and killed him. That the Jews are incapable of spiritualising the messianic prophecies is a critique often repeated by Maximus. But in his view both the Jews and the Hellenes are killers of God or murderers of the *Logos* because they are incapable of passing over sense perception and imagination.

### VI. *The Five Modes of Contemplation*

In this ascent through contemplation from the perceptible world to the invisible creative *Logos* Maximus distinguishes five different perspectives or 'mystical reasons' from which we may contemplate the whole of nature: being, motion, difference, mixture and position (οὐσία, κίνησις, διαφορά, κράσις and θέσις).<sup>52</sup> The world exists, is in movement, is composed out of different entities, and yet wholly mixed to form an organic unity and it occupies a certain position. Being (οὐσία), motion (κίνησις) and difference (διαφορά) belong to the 'greatest classes of all beings', which Plato distinguishes in *Sophist* 248aff. together with 'sameness' and 'rest'. The latter two are not in Maximus' list but are replaced by κράσις and θέσις, which are less fitting in a Platonic view. The term κράσις reminds us of Stoic cosmology, where the universe is seen as being wholly mixed. Even more surprising is the inclusion of θέσις as a fifth general aspect of all things. The term indicates the position of quantitative things within space in reference to one another: above, below, in the middle, before, behind, left, right. For each

<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to notice that Maximus' critique of those who worship the creation instead of the creator was already anticipated by the 'Jew' Philo. In Philo's interpretation, Chaldea from where Abraham departed stands for those people who are incapable of discovering the cause of the sensible world. See in this volume Laurant, 129–130.

<sup>52</sup> See 1133bff. On this important discussion of the five modes of contemplation see recently Harrington (2007), with bibliographical references to previous treatments of this section on p. 197, n. 7.

body must 'lie somewhere'.<sup>53</sup> To consider *θέσις* or *κείσθαι* as a universal category of nature seems to imply that only corporeal beings exist, unless we take the term metaphorically. For according to the Platonic view only the sensible world is situated in place and in time. Maximus, however, claims that whatever exists—apart from God himself—is situated somewhere in place and at some time.<sup>54</sup>

By combining in different ways the five ways of considering the created world one may develop five different modes of contemplation. They will ultimately reduce the created world to its creator, the divine *Logos*, and lead to the provocative conclusion that God himself is the being, the movement, the difference, the mixture and the position of all things. This is done in five steps:

### *First Mode of Contemplation*

In the first mode of contemplation we consider the world from all five perspectives.

The first three perspectives (being, movement and difference) make us *know* God as creator, as providence and as judge of all beings (ὡς δημιουργοῦ καὶ προνοητοῦ καὶ κριτοῦ).

First, through the consideration of the being of all things we may discover the *creative* cause of all beings, for nothing finds the cause of its being in itself. We are thus taught that God exists, though, as we have seen before, we do not endeavour to know what this cause is in its essence (κατ' οὐσίαν); for there is no indication in things caused about the nature of this cause, as it is absolutely transcendent.

Second, by considering the *motion* which is inherent in all creatures we may come to know God as *providence*. God is in fact the ultimate explanation of 'the inviolable mode of existence' of each thing and the cause that holds together all things that are orderly distinguished from one another according to their constitutive *logoi*.<sup>55</sup> As Maximus explains, he does not take providence here in the moral sense as the force whereby God brings human beings to the right modes of action, moving them through his

<sup>53</sup> See Aristot. *Cat.* 5a18.

<sup>54</sup> See section 38 where Maximus demonstrates that 'whatever exists except god is always in place, and therefore also necessarily in time'.

<sup>55</sup> δι' ἧς τῶν γεγονότων τὴν κατ' οὐσίαν ἐκάστου κατ' εἶδος ἀπαράλλακτον ταυτότητα καὶ ὡσαύτως ἀπαρעγχείρητον διεξαγωγὴν θεωροῦντες, τὸν συνέχοντα καὶ φυλάττοντα καθ' ἑνωσιν ἄρρητον ἀλλήλων εὐκρινῶς ἀφωρισμένα τὰ πάντα, καθ' οὓς ὑπέστησαν ἕκαστα λόγους (1133c).

dispensation (οικονομικήν) from what they must not do to what they have to do.<sup>56</sup> Providence here has a cosmological sense as in the Stoic-Platonic tradition: it is a force holding together the universe and preserving it according to the *logoi* in which it primarily consists.<sup>57</sup>

Third, through the contemplation of the *difference* between the different things in the universe we may come to know God as 'judge'. Considering the properties and power that belong to each thing in a way proportionate to their being we come to know that God is the wise distributor of the *logoi* of the individual things. As in the case of providence, judgment is not taken here in the moral sense as an 'educative force punishing sinners and rewarding those who live according to virtues' (οὐ τὴν παιδευτικὴν καὶ οἶον κολαστικὴν τῶν ἀμαρτανόντων). Taken in this moral sense judgment and providence are connected with the impulses following from our choices (ταῖς ἡμῶν προαιρετικαῖς ὁρμαῖς): they avert us from what is evil and bring us back to what is good. As with providence we have to understand judgment here in its cosmological sense as the cause that guarantees the 'permanence' (διαμονήν) of beings, according to which each thing keeps an unalterable permanence in its natural identity, just as it was determined from the beginning by its creator.

The other two modes of contemplation of the universe—according to mixture and to position—do not lead to *knowledge* of God, but to our own moral transformation,<sup>58</sup> as they 'educate us to virtue and to affinity with God' (παιδαγωγικοὺς πρὸς ἀρετὴν καὶ τὴν πρὸς θεὸν οἰκείωσιν). For what the mind can contemplate with knowledge, it can also experience, becoming itself the contemplated divine form in a habitual manner through virtue. In fact the *mixture* or composition of beings may be seen as the symbol of the mixture of human choices (γνώμη) constituted through the virtuous dispositions.<sup>59</sup> The term γνώμη denotes for Maximus not the faculty of

<sup>56</sup> In taking providence and judgment as general perspectives on creation Maximus is influenced by his reading of Evagrius. However, in making a clear distinction between a moral-economical and a cosmological understanding of providence and judgment Maximus distances himself from the Origenist tradition which is still dominant in Evagrius. See Sherwood (1955a) 36–37 and Thunberg (1965) 69–72. Maximus nevertheless insists that the two meanings cannot be disconnected: 'For I know that they are one and the same as power, but have a differing and many-formed activity in relation to us' (1136a tr. Louth).

<sup>57</sup> In this interpretation of providence Maximus again depends on Nemesius: see 120.23 ff. Nemesius on providence is extensively quoted by Maximus in 1188–1193b.

<sup>58</sup> See Harrington (2007) 205–206 with reference to De Lubac.

<sup>59</sup> τὴν δὲ κρᾶσιν τῶν ὄντων ἥτοι σύνθεσιν τῆς ἡμετέρας γνώμης εἶναι σύμβολον—κραθεῖσα γὰρ αὕτη ταῖς ἀρεταῖς καὶ ἐαυτῇ ταύτας κεράσασα τὸν κατὰ διάνοιαν θεοπρεπέστατον καὶ αὐτῇ συνίστησι κόσμον (1136a–b).

the will, which belongs to our human nature, the principle of voluntary acts, but rather the way we use this faculty, 'a mode of life, i.e. a personal and individual disposition acquired through free acts of decision'.<sup>60</sup> γνώμη has an ambivalent character; it can be directed to good or evil, and it is as all human being changeable unless it acquires through the virtues an almost permanent character. When it is mixed with the virtues, says Maximus, it constitutes within the rational soul an order (*cosmos*) worthy of God. The consideration of the *position* of all things teaches us what this ethical character is that comes about in the soul according to its choice (τοῦ κατὰ γνώμην ἤθους): it must steadily hold what appears to be good by reason and accept no change from this foundation in reason because of circumstances.<sup>61</sup> If a human person is formed through these two modes (i.e. mixture and position), he becomes himself God, 'experiencing the fact of being God'. For, as Maximus explains, such a person not only sees according to *theory* God's goodness expressed in the world around him, but is also himself completely transformed according to *logos*, taking his goodness as his form.<sup>62</sup>

The first mode of contemplation thus combines both the theoretical aspect of philosophy—we come to the knowledge of God as the first cause of the universe—and the practical: we are transformed through the virtues to become similar to God.

### *Second Contemplation*

If one considers the existence (ὑπόστασιν) of all things from *three* perspectives: being, movement (now combined with position) and difference (combined with mixture), one may come to the conclusion that the divine cause exists, that it is wise and that it is alive. In fact, the cause can be seen as present in various ways in the things that are caused. Following a Christian tradition, Maximus understands the triad of being, life and thinking as expressing the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

<sup>60</sup> See Thunberg (1965) 213–218 and in particular 216–217.

<sup>61</sup> τὴν δὲ θέσιν τοῦ κατὰ γνώμην ἤθους εἶναι διδάσκαλον, ὡς παγίως ἔχειν περὶ τὸ εὖ δόξαν τῷ ῥυθμίζοντι λόγῳ ὀφείλοντος, ἥκιστα τοῖς συμπύπτουσιν ἐκ τῆς κατὰ λόγον βάσεως ἀλλοίωσιν τὴν οἰανοῦν δεχομένου (1136b).

<sup>62</sup> δι' ὧν τυπούμενος ὁ ἄνθρωπος θεὸς γίνεται, τὸ θεὸς εἶναι παθών, ἐκ τῶν ὄντων ὅλην τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν κατ' ἀγαθότητα ἔμφασιν κατὰ νοῦν ὥσπερ ὁρᾶν καὶ ἑαυτῷ κατὰ λόγον ταύτην εἰλικρινεστάτην μορφούμενος (1133b). On the doctrine of deification in Maximus see Russell (2004) 263 ff.

### *Third Contemplation*

One can consider the whole of creation from the point of view of *position* alone, distinguishing in it three levels: the earth, the heavens and what is situated between, the sublunary sphere. According to this threefold position creation teaches us ethical, natural and theological philosophy. Heaven stands metaphorically for theology, earth for natural philosophy, whereas ethics is understood as occupied with the intermediary domain.<sup>63</sup>

### *Fourth Consideration*

One may behold creation from the point of view of *difference* alone, making a distinction between 'what contains and what is contained', that is between heaven and what is within it, and thus reduce the three above-mentioned forms (i.e. ethical, natural and theological philosophy) to two, namely wisdom (*sophia*), which according to Maximus stands for theology, that is the contemplation of God himself, and the desire of wisdom (*philosophia*), which consists in both practical and natural philosophy. Just as the sphere of heaven contains the whole universe, wisdom encompasses within itself the reasons of the others modes of philosophy. The practice of philosophy is directed to wisdom as the end it attempts to attain, combining character and choice, action and contemplation, virtue and knowledge.

### *The Fifth and Final Consideration*

Finally Maximus exhorts us to consider the whole of creation solely from the point of view of *mixture*, by considering the universe as a harmonious composition wherein all things are connected with one another. We may thus come to contemplate the demiurgic *Logos*, who is the cause of the connection of all things together. Proceeding in this manner we will reduce the two above-mentioned modes of contemplation (i.e. wisdom and philosophy) to one. For we will bring over the intellect, which so far was dispersed in the *logoi* of the individual things, towards the 'one cause that brings together and draws back to it all that comes from it'. In fact, if we examine thoughtfully all things that are, we may become convinced

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<sup>63</sup> See also *supra* 1129a: 'the written law of revelation is itself organized as a world (*kosmos*) paralleling the visible world composed out of the heaven, the earth and what is in the middle, I mean ethical, natural and theological philosophy'.

that only God properly is both the being and the movement of beings and the clear distinction of what is different, and the indissoluble holding together of what is mixed, and the immutable foundation of what is posited and the cause of absolutely all being however understood and of all movement and difference, mixture and position.<sup>64</sup>

In our examination of the world as a created order we will in fact come to see that whatever exists, moves, is different and assembled to unity, and has a position in this cosmos owes its ontological status not to its own activity but to the creative Logos who contains in its unity the *logoi* of all things 'however understood', that is substances, accidents, properties, terrestrial or celestial beings, sensible or intelligible, particulars or universals. Maximus thus comes to the provocative conclusion that the five considerations of the created world, when pursued into their ultimate explanation, make us consider the divine Logos itself that is 'ineffably' expressed in this world. Seen in this manner the five modes of contemplation offer us the attributes of the creative God himself, who is the being of all things, their motion and position, their difference and mixture. Although it is not explicitly said in this passage, this affirmative theology must of course be counterbalanced by the negation of all the attributes to safeguard God's transcendence.

In this final ascent of the soul, whereby it integrates into one simple intuition all considerations, ethical *praxis* keeps its essential mediating role. In fact, as Maximus observes, it does not suffice to come to the most supreme form of contemplation, by considering the creator starting from the indications and symbols in this sensible world. As the saints show in their life, they have also radically transformed their soul by 'transferring the mystical contemplation of the sensible world to the spiritual cosmos within our mind which is accomplished through the virtues' (τὴν κατὰ τὸν αἰσθητὸν αἰῶνα μυστικὴν θεωρίαν ἐπὶ τὸν κατὰ διάνοιαν ἐν πνεύματι διὰ τῶν ἀρετῶν συμπληρούμενον κόσμον μετήνεγκαν). In fact, as much as the sensible world, or rather even more than the sensible world, our rational soul may become, through its choices and the dispositions of the different virtues, one well organized cosmos (τὴν τοῦ κατὰ διάνοιαν γνωμικοῦ κόσμου οὐσίαν) thanks to the same *Logos* who also orders the sensible world. For having integrated the different modes of contemplation into one, the souls imprint

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<sup>64</sup> διὰ τοῦ πεπεῖσθαι σαφῶς μόνον τὸν θεὸν κυρίως εἶναι λοιπὸν ἐκ τῆς πρὸς τὰ ὄντα ἀκριβοῦς ἐνατενίσεως καὶ οὐσίαν τῶν ὄντων καὶ κίνησιν καὶ τῶν διαφερόντων εὐκρίνειαν καὶ συνοχὴν ἀδιάλυτον τῶν κεκραμένων καὶ ἴδρυσιν ἀμετάθετον τῶν τεθειμένων καὶ πάσης ἀπλῶς τῆς ὅπως οὖν νοουμένης οὐσίας καὶ κινήσεως καὶ διαφορᾶς κρᾶσεώς τε καὶ θέσεως αἴτιον (1137a).

upon themselves,<sup>65</sup> through the different forms of the virtues, the sole *Logos*. Having thus passed through all *logoi*, both those expressed in sensible things and those of the virtues, or rather having gone with them to what wholly transcends them, the *Logos* who is beyond being and goodness, the saints come to the highest state of divinisation:

So that wholly united to the whole *Logos*, so far as is possible to their natural power, they are so much qualified by Him to the best of their abilities as to become also known from Him alone, having, as a transparent mirror, the whole form of the divine *Logos* that looks into it appearing in it without intermittence through its divine characteristics, because none of the ancient characters which may betray its human nature is left behind, as they all yield to what is better, just as air that is not light is wholly intermingled with light.<sup>66</sup>

In this magnificent conclusion, Maximus attempts to explain how the human soul, having been united with the *Logos* through contemplation and virtues, becomes itself wholly the whole *Logos* without however losing its own human character. He explains this divinisation by using two celebrated images, the mirror and the illuminated air. An ideal mirror is such that it is fully reflective and makes the beholder forget that it has also its own properties (the material it is made of, bronze or glass, the frame): its own nature has become nothing but mirroring. The face looking in it will be wholly reflected and appearing in it. The example of the mirror was already used in this sense by Plotinus.<sup>67</sup> The metaphor of the illuminated air, which will have a great fortune in the later tradition, seems to be Maximus' own invention. The air is by its own nature without any light, but when illuminated by a source of light (such as the sun) it seems to be nothing but light as it is entirely transparent and receptive of light. Yet even then the air keeps its own nature, which is without light, as is clear from the fact that at sunset it becomes dark.<sup>68</sup> This is again a perfect example to show how the human soul may become entirely divinised so that it seems to be only God and known only through God.

<sup>65</sup> ἐναπωμόρξαντο means literally 'wiped off upon'.

<sup>66</sup> τοσούτον ἐνδεχομένης ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ἐποιώθησαν, ὥστε καὶ ἀπὸ μόνου γνωρίζεσθαι, οἷον ἔσοπτρα διειδέστατα, ὅλον τοῦ ἐνορῶντος θεοῦ λόγου τὸ εἶδος ἀπαραλείπτως διὰ τῶν θείων αὐτοῦ γνωρισμάτων φαινόμενον ἔχοντες τῷ ἐλλειφθῆναι μηδὲνα τῶν παλαιῶν χαρακτῆρων, οἷς μηνύεσθαι πέφυκε τὸ ἀνθρώπινον, πάντων εἰζάντων τοῖς ἀμείνοσιν, οἷον ἀῆρ ἀφεγγῆς φωτὶ διόλου μετεγκραθεῖς (1137b–c). I am indebted to Guy Guldentops for a better understanding of this passage.

<sup>67</sup> On Plotinus' use of the mirror metaphor see D'Ancona (2008).

<sup>68</sup> Maximus' use of the metaphor of the illuminated air profoundly influenced Eriugena: see Harrington (2007) 211–212.

There is no place in this limited contribution to follow Maximus in many more interpretations of biblical texts illustrating and confirming the views exposed above. Let us conclude with his own conclusion of the first section of *Ambiguum* six:

This is what I have to say as a conjecture on how to understand what this great master [Gregory] said about the power and grace of the saints ‘according to reason and contemplation’, conjecturing as far as possible rather than categorically speaking (for our intellect falls far short from the measure of truth), having through the preceding sections tackled by argument [the meaning of what he said] and as it were tracking it down.<sup>69</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

Although Maximus explicitly wants to distance the Christian way to God from Hellenic idolatry, he is deeply influenced in his presentation of the contemplative life by a long philosophical tradition wherein theoretical activity is seen as the ultimate fulfilment of human life. What he says (following Gregory of Nazianzus) about the life of the saints, setting them as a model of perfection for all human beings, is similar to what Plotinus and other Platonic philosophers say about the sages or virtuous people: the subordination of praxis to theory, the insistence on the inward character of virtue over its manifestation through bodily action, the emphasis on the permanent stable condition of virtue. As in the Platonic tradition, it is the main goal of philosophy to become similar to God both in contemplating the divine being and in experiencing his presence within the soul. That the highest form of knowledge not only leads to a perfect assimilation of the object known but also to a transformation of the knowing subject can also be seen as in line with the philosophical project. Maximus’ critique of the Hellenic attitude, which leads to an idolizing contemplation of the sensible cosmos, cannot be taken as a critique of philosophy and certainly not of Plato, who exhorts us to ascend from the surface of sensible objects to the divine Forms or *logoi* as Maximus calls them. Yet for pagan Platonic philosophers the world is also in its sensible appearance a divine reality

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<sup>69</sup> Τὸν μὲν οὖν σημαινόμενον τρόπον περὶ τῆς τῶν ἁγίων κατὰ τὸν λόγον καὶ τὴν θεωρίαν δυνάμειώς τε καὶ χάριτος ὑπὸ τοῦ μεγάλου τούτου διδασκάλου, κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, στοχαστικῶς ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἀποφαντικῶς—πολλῷ γὰρ ἀπολείπεται τῷ μέτρῳ τῆς κατ’ αὐτὸν ἀληθείας ὁ ἡμέτερος νοῦς—διὰ τῶν εἰρημένων ὑποδραμῶν τῷ λόγῳ καὶ ὥσπερ ἰχνηλατήσας, τοιόνδε καθ’ ὑπόνοιαν μόνον φημί (1193b).



endowed with eternal existence. Maximus, on the contrary, understands the world as a created universe having a beginning of its existence, moving towards its end, posited in time and space. Only through the divinisation of human nature—mediated by Christ, the incarnated *Logos*—may it reach its eternal ‘well being’. Another difference with non-Christian philosophy is the reference to divine grace without which no human effort may attain its end.<sup>70</sup> Notwithstanding these differences due to his Christian beliefs, Maximus shares with the Hellenic philosophers the contemplative wonder for the multiform manifestation of the divine *Logos* within the sensible cosmos.

### Appendix.

#### *Isaac Comnenus: How to Integrate the Views of Proclus, Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus on the Different Modes of Knowledge of the Soul*

In the early twelfth century a learned Byzantine prince Isaac Comnenus composed three treatises on providence, fate, freedom and evil, which are mainly based on long extracts taken from Proclus’ lost *Tria Opuscula*. This Isaac was also an admirer of Dionysius and Maximus Confessor, as is clear from the fact that he inserted in his Christian adaptation of Proclus long quotations from both authors.<sup>71</sup> The most successful achievement of this integration is to be found in section XI of the treatise *On Providence*, which is devoted to the discussion of the different modes of knowledge. Isaac follows in chapters 41–47 Proclus’ exposition on this topic, though mixing his argument with extracts taken from diverse works of Maximus. Proclus distinguishes five levels of knowledge: opinion, reason, dialectic, intuitive intellectual knowledge and a mystic knowledge beyond the intellect.<sup>72</sup> In the last chapter [48] of this section Isaac departs from Proclus and inserts a long development ‘on the three general motions of the soul’, which is entirely based on a clever interweaving of Maximus’ exposition in *Ambig.* VI.3 (112d–113c) with Dionysius’ celebrated discussion in *De div. nom.* 4.9.<sup>73</sup> He must, of course, have noticed that their threefold division of the modes of knowledge is different from that of Proclus, who distinguishes five levels.

<sup>70</sup> Maximus discusses grace in section 20 which is devoted to the interpretation of Melchisedech: see 1137c ff.

<sup>71</sup> See Steel (1982).

<sup>72</sup> See Steel (2007) 16–17, 29–30.

<sup>73</sup> See the edition of Isaac (1979).

Isaac, however, believes that Proclus' five levels can be reduced to the three general motions of the soul analyzed by Maximus: sense, reason and intellect. This is what he affirms in the first sentence, which connects this chapter 48 with the preceding Proclean exposition: Ταῦτα περὶ τῶν πέντε τρόπων τῆς γνώσεως, οἱ συνάγονται εἰς τρεῖς καθολικὰς τῆς ψυχῆς κινήσεις· τὴν κατὰ νοῦν, τὴν κατὰ λόγον, καὶ τὴν κατ' αἴσθησιν. There remains another problem. Maximus is undoubtedly influenced by Dionysius in his exposition on the three general motions of the soul, but, as always he uses his sources in his own ingenious way. Dionysius makes a distinction between (1) the circular movement whereby the soul turns into itself from the many things outside and directs its unified powers to the Good; (2) the spiral movement whereby the soul receives knowledge of the divine in a manner appropriate to its nature, that is in a rational and discursive manner, using activities that are not purely intellective but 'mixed'; (3) the movement in a straight line that goes out to what is outside the soul and from there as from certain symbols is reduced to a unified theory. This mathematical metaphor disappears entirely in Maximus. His distinction is much simpler: (1) the intellective motion of the soul towards God, (2) the rational discursivity and (3) sense perception which goes outward but also returns to itself from the sensible things as from certain symbols. Maximus uses aspects of Dionysius' description of the second spiral movement to describe what he calls the third movement that starts from sense perception. Isaac cleverly integrated both texts so as to compose one coherent doctrine on the three motions of the soul, whereby Maximus offers the main threefold structure. As one can see in the text of chapter 48 quoted below there is almost no word in the text that does not come from Dionysius and Maximus. What a plagiarism, one might think. But one can as well admire Isaac's scholarship, for he noticed that Maximus had used Dionysius' argument on the threefold motion of the soul and integrates the Dionysian perspective in his own 'paraphrase', thus offering a synthesis for the five levels distinguished by Proclus, himself a source of Dionysius.

Isaac Comnenus *De providentia* 11.48.<sup>74</sup>

Ταῦτα περὶ τῶν πέντε τρόπων τῆς γνώσεως, οἱ συνάγονται εἰς τρεῖς καθολικὰς τῆς ψυχῆς κινήσεις· τὴν κατὰ νοῦν, τὴν κατὰ λόγον, καὶ τὴν κατ' αἴσθησιν. αἷς

<sup>74</sup> Quotations from Maximus are in bold. Extracts from Dionysius are underlined. The Dionysius texts are taken from *De div. nom.* 112.13–14; 153.10–154.6; 156.17–20; and *Theol. myst.* 144.5–9.

περιποιείται ἐαυτῇ τὸ ἀπλανές, συνάγουσα ταύτας κατὰ τὸν ἀληθῆ καὶ ἄπται-  
 στον τῆς κατὰ φύσιν κινήσεως τρόπον τῇ τῶν νοερῶν αὐτῆς δυνάμεων συνελίζει εἰς  
 μίαν ἀπλὴν τε καὶ ἀνερμήνευτον. τῇ μὲν γὰρ κατ' αἴσθησιν κινήσει οἷα συνθέτω  
πρὸς τὰ περὶ ἐαυτὴν προιοῦσα, καὶ τῶν ἐκτὸς ἐφαπτομένη, καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν πολλῶν  
τῶν ἔξωθεν ὡς ἕκ τινων συμβόλων πεποικιλμένων καὶ πεπληθυσμένων ἀναματ-  
τομένη τοὺς λόγους τῶν ὁρατῶν, ἐπιστρέφει εἰς ἐαυτήν. καὶ ἀναγομένη ἐπὶ τὰς  
ἀπλᾶς καὶ ἡνωμένας θεωρίας διὰ μέσου τοῦ λόγου πρὸς τὸν νοῦν ἀναβιβάζει τὴν  
αἴσθησιν, ἀπλοὺς ἔχουσαν μόνους τοὺς τῶν αἰσθητῶν πνευματικούς λόγους. τῇ  
δὲ κατὰ λόγον κινήσει ὡς ταύτης μὲν φυσικῇ, τοῦ ἀγνώστου δὲ ὀριστικῇ κατ'  
αἰτίαν, εἰς ἐαυτὴν συναγομένη οἰκειῶς ἐαυτῇ τὰς θείας ἐλλάμπεται γνώσεις, ἐν-  
τιθεμένη ἐαυτῇ κατ' ἐπιστήμην λογικῶς καὶ διεξοδικῶς, καὶ οἷον συμμείκτοις  
καὶ μεταβατικαῖς ἐνεργείαις πάντας τοὺς ἐπ' αὐτῇ φυσικούς λόγους μορφωτι-  
κοὺς ὄντας τοῦ μόνον κατ' αἰτίαν ἐγνωσμένου. τὰ γὰρ θεϊότατα καὶ ἀκρότατα  
τῶν ὁρωμένων καὶ νοουμένων ὑποθετικοὶ τινὲς εἰσι λόγοι, ὑποβεβλημένοι τῷ  
πάντων ὑπερέχοντι, δι' ὧν δείκνυται ἢ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν ἐπίνοιαν αὐτοῦ παρουσία  
αὐταῖς ταῖς νοηταῖς ἀκρότησι τῶν ἀγιοτάτων αὐτοῦ τόπων ἐπιβατεύουσα. καὶ  
τὸν λόγον κατὰ μίαν ἀπλὴν τε καὶ ἀδιαίρετον φρόνησιν ἐνοειδῶς τοὺς τῶν ὄντων  
ἔχοντα λόγους ἐνώσασα πρὸς τὸν νοῦν, κατ' αὐτὸν ἐνοειδῆς γενομένη, ἐνοῦται ταῖς  
ἐνιαίως ἡνωμέναις δυνάμεσι. καὶ χειραγωγουμένη ἐπὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ὄντα καὶ  
ἐν καὶ ταῦτόν καὶ ἀναρχον καὶ ἀτελεῦτητον καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν, ἀγνώστως κινεῖ-  
ται περὶ θεὸν κατ' οὐδένα τρόπον ἐξ οὐδενὸς τῶν ὄντων διὰ τὴν ὑπεροχὴν τοῦτο  
ἐπιγινώσκουσα κατὰ νοῦν καθαρώς ἀπολυθέντα τῆς περὶ πάντα τὰ ὄντα κινή-  
σεως καὶ αὐτῆς ἡρεμοῦντα τῆς καθ' αὐτὸν φυσικῆς ἐνεργείας, καθ' ὃν ὀλικῶς  
πρὸς θεὸν συναρχθεῖσα ὅλη ὅλῳ θεῷ ἐγκραθῆναι ἀξιοῦται διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος, ὅλην  
κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν τὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ ἐπουρανίου φορέσασα καὶ γενομένη θεοειδῆς.  
τῶν γὰρ μεριστῶν ἡμῶν ἑτεροτήτων ὑπερκοσμίως συμπτυττομένων συναγόμεθα  
εἰς θεοειδῆ μονάδα καὶ θεομίμητον ἔνωσιν. οὕτω δὲ γενομένη θεοειδῆς ἐπιβάλλει  
δι' ἀγνώστου ἐνώσεως ταῖς ἀκτίσι τοῦ ἀπροσίτου φωτὸς ἀνομμάτοις ἐπιβολαῖς,  
ἔχουσα καὶ δύναμιν εἰς τὸ νοεῖν, δι' ἧς βλέπει τὰ νοητὰ ὅταν ὁ νοὺς διὰ τῶν  
αἰσθητῶν πρὸς θεωρητικὰς ἀνακινήται διανοήσεις καὶ ἔνωσιν ὑπεραίρουσαν τὴν  
νοῦ φύσιν, δι' ἧς συνάπτεται πρὸς τὰ ἐπέκεινα αὐτοῦ.



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